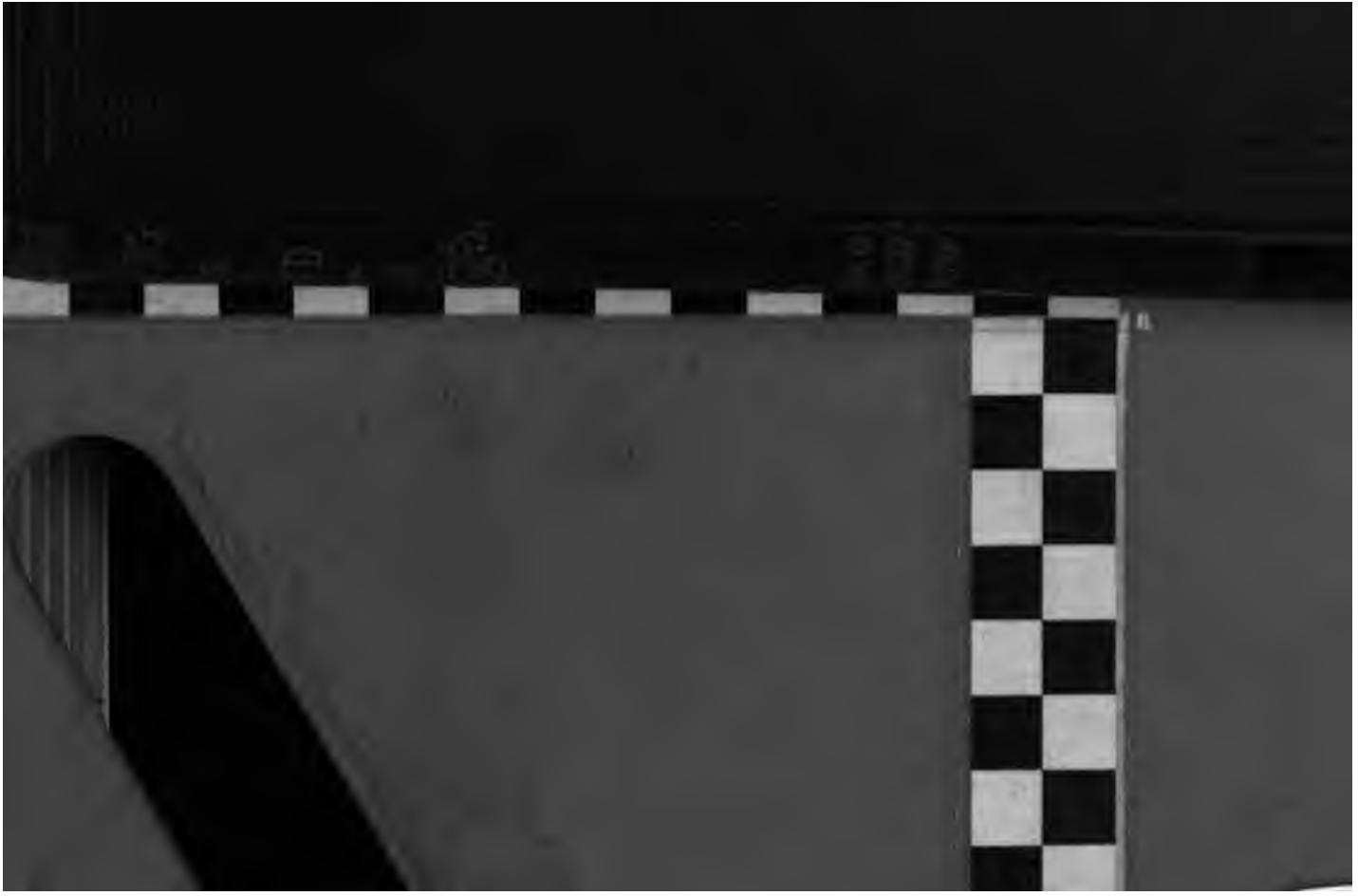

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SOWING THE WIND.

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A NOVEL.

BY

E. LYNN LINTON,

AUTHOR OF 'LIZZIE LORTON OF GREYRIGG,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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SOWING THE WIND.

CHAPTER I.

LOVED AND LOST.

MEANWHILE the unconscious object of all these thoughts and speculations grew daily weaker and weaker, till it was plain to those who saw her that privation and sorrow had done their work, and that the last hour of poor Harriet Grant was not far off. The only one who said he did not believe in her danger was Richard Norton; and he seemed to have a kind of passionate determination that she should live, and see bright days to come. And so he told her often, with tears in his eyes, and forced smiles

about his lips, and the cold man's anguish at the approaching loss of the only woman ever loved.

Those bright days to come seemed to have already partially dawned upon the widow; for since her first unlucky loss, and the wide blank of friendlessness into which she had plunged on her arrival, she had not had to bear either poverty or loneliness. Richard Norton's mysterious supplies kept her well provided; so that at least the bitter pang of immediate want was spared her; and she was too weak and helpless to consider for the future. Besides, she had a child's reliance on the lawyer; and when he told her that he would take care of her and her baby, she felt sure that all would come right if he promised to protect her.

Jane too, and foolish fluttering kindly-natured Mrs. Osborn were generous and good and helpful, and never let her feel lonesome or unbefriended. And if Jane was at times rough to almost coarseness, yet how could she be offended when she knew that she had gone perhaps six

miles—into the heart of the city, and back again —just to procure some special delicacy to be had only at one particular place, having to sit writing till late into the night to make up for lost time? Sometimes she would get up at some unearthly hour in the morning and go to Covent Garden or to Leadenhall market for pleasant little purchases, coming as surprises; and if she did present them with some half rude speech, flinging them down on the table "with a bang," as her mother said more graphically than euphemistically, the manner was merely manner, and substantial generosities like these, involving real self-sacrifice, were of more worth than a smooth speech or gracefully considered gestures. Even Harriet Grant, not too wise nor penetrating, could see the better mind behind this rough exterior; and seeing it could overlook the rest.

As for Mrs. Osborn she was all that her daughter was not, and nothing that she was. If Jane was rude and capable, she was gentle and feckless; if Jane was the one on whom

to rely for presence of mind in moments of emergency, for thoughtful promptitude and for sturdy stability, her mother, who had not the courage of a mouse nor the quickness of mind of a child, would while away the easy hours by her unending flow of gentle babble, nursing the baby which Jane rarely touched or even looked at, but having to be narrowly watched all the same, that she did not smother it by way of keeping it warm, nor give it improper food by way of "goody goody." She would make up a becoming head-dress for the invalid out of a few odd bits of lace and ribbon; she would set out the room in quite a stylish manner by the aid of a little coloured paper, or a few inches of pink glazed calico; and while she hid the dusty covers with trumpery festoons of tissue paper—or, not heeding, did not hide them—Jane took care that the mutton was well done, and primarily that there was mutton to do at all, and scolded their patient unsparingly if she did not eat heartily enough to please her. So that between them both the

widow and the babe got good attendance and womanly care, and the last few feverish days glided on towards the great gulf of time peacefully, calmly, almost happily.

The most sorrow-stricken soul among them all was Richard Norton. I have said that he was a cold man, and that he loved this poor Harriet Grant. He had known her in her cradle; he had seen her gradually develop from childhood to girlhood, and from girlhood to womanhood,—his love for her growing with her growth, and as she changed changing in character with her. When she was about seventeen he acknowledged to himself that he loved her. She was beyond his reach then: her social circumstances and the difference between their ages would have rendered such a thing as marriage impossible. Soon she was beyond his reach even more irrevocably. But in all the years that followed—when she was a wife he still loved her—when she went abroad with her husband he still loved her; and lived with the settled conviction that some day she would come back

again, and then that she would be his. When she did come back, a widow, he believed that his long cherished dream would be fulfilled; that, as he had waited with a martyr's burning pain, so now he was to have the martyr's crown of glory.

A man of strong will and of immense self-command, what he desired that he assumed to be already obtained. His very profession itself, where he had always to be master and director, had increased this arbitrary will which lay under his bland and courteous manner; and lawyer though he was, he did not scruple to act in direct defiance of the statutes he was appointed to defend and maintain, had he any personal motive for his illegality. He excused himself in his own mind by saying that he acted from a higher motive than mere technical obedience, and that his own private judgment and sense of right were above and beyond all law to him.

The woman he loved knew nothing of his nature, nor of his love. To her he was simply a fatherly friend—the only family friend remaining

—the only one who knew her in her days of innocence and social pride of place—before her folly and her sin had dragged her down to the misery of her present life; he was her rock, her background, her mainstay, her protector, her all but father; and as a father she loved him, and believed that he loved her.

So too he was accepted by the Osborns; and when he came day after day, and evening after evening, bringing little bags of fruit, or sometimes a bunch of flowers, they said how kind he was to that poor Mrs. Grant; and Mrs. Osborn wished that she had such a friend, and that Jeannette had such a father; but no one dreamt of the fiery anguish of love, and grief, and sorrow for the past, and dread of the present, that burnt in his veins and swelled his heart almost to breaking. The cold eyes, the calm pale face, the smooth and careful manner, the studied speech, the very dress in its faultless pedantry of neatness—who could see below the surface of all these quiet disguises and read the heart of Richard Norton as God alone saw it? Least of all Harriet Grant,

rising feebly with her pale smile and dark eyes lighted up with gladness when her dear old friend came into the room with his cheery air and constant speech. "Well! and how is little pussy to-day?"

She had been his "little pussy" to him when she used to sit on his knee and beg for sugar-plums, and he had kept up the familiar endearment from that time to now. So time crept on, and day by day Harriet grew weaker and weaker, and day by day Richard Norton's sorrow deepened, and with it a kind of baffled rebelliousness of despair religious men would have called impiety.

One evening Mrs. Grant felt strangely ill—failing, oppressed, dying. It was one of those sultry, sunless, summer evenings when the dead air caught in the narrow streets is stifled out of all life and motion, when the very roses of the flower-girls have no scent, and all voices seem hoarse with the burning fever of the city, and all life is panting for the freer air of the country. It was an evening for the sudden outbreak of some deadly epidemic, for suicide, for crime, for

mad riot, as a reaction against its horrid stillness; it was an evening which would raise the death-rate by many a score, for it was an evening of death itself.

The poor little widow was lying near the open window vainly gasping for fresh air; but her window looked only into the dead and gloomy street, and her dream of green fields and pleasant running waters and the pattering of soft rain among the leaves and the morning song of birds and the sweet rare scents of flowers, was all but a dream: perhaps, who knows? to be soon realized in even a fairer country than the English home she was remembering. Presently Jane Osborn came into the room. She came in roughly and without knocking, that being a courtesy not quite in her way.

"Well! and how are you to-night?" she said in her harsh voice, tossing back the hair which was falling in such disorderly magnificence about her freckled face.

"I am so glad you have come!" said Mrs. Grant with feeble eagerness.

"Yes, but I can't stay long," said Jane. "Smith has sent me up some work to do—some of Wyndham's work you know—and the boy will be here for it at eleven o'clock. But I thought before I began I would look in at you and see how you were."

Tears came into the invalid's eyes.

"Now what's that for?" Jane asked in her abrupt way. "Why are you beginning to cry I wonder?"

"I wanted you so much this evening!" said Harriet plaintively. "I feel so ill! and I am so lonely!" And she burst into tears.

"Please don't do that!" said Jane in an authoritative voice; many people would have said a harsh and unkind voice; but it was meant to be only firm and preventive. "I can't bear to see women cry! It makes me savage except when they are ill, and then if I can't help them it makes me so sorry for them! Don't cry, there's a good soul; and it's so babyish too at the best! I'll stay as long as I can with you, but business is business you know, and work is

work, and a promise is a promise; and as I undertook to do Wyndham's work for him while he's away I must, you know, if I die for it."

"Yes, I know," sobbed Mrs. Grant helplessly; "but I had so hoped you could have been with me this evening."

"Won't mamma do? She is a softer woman in a sick room than I am," said Jane; "and," disdainfully—but the disdain touching her mother only, not the invalid—"she understands more about hysterics and all that than I do. You are hysterical this evening, you know,; and I am a rough, harsh fellow, and not good at that kind of work. Won't she do as well?"

"Oh, she is very kind and good, and I am very grateful to her," said Mrs. Grant; "but"—she hesitated.

"Well! say it out," said Jane: "but what?"

"I wanted some one stronger than she is—some one I could rely on more; some one I could tell my secret to." This last was said in a low, almost suffocated, voice.

Jane looked at her earnestly. She might be

hard to the small or fictitious sorrows of life, but when face to face with its realities no one's heart was stronger or more sympathetic.

"Why do you want to tell your secret, as you call it, to-night?" she asked gravely.

"Because I am dying," said Harriet quite simply. "No! it is of no use to tell me I am not. I am, Jane! I am dying now; and I want to give my child into the charge of some one who will take care of him, and see that he has his rights."

"Don't Mr. Norton know all about you?" Jane asked.

"Yes, all!"

"Then won't he see to the little man?"

"He has promised to take care of him, and I have been quite content with that promise until to-night; but to-night I seem to want some woman's care for him—some one I can trust—some one who will be kind and strong too, like you, Jane!"

"No! I am not the woman for babies!" said Jane quickly. "Don't think it! I can't handle

them like anybody else, so I can't and won't promise that kind of care of your little fellow. But I will promise that he shall be cared for, somehow; and I will be responsible for that, whoever has it to do. Now tell me exactly what you want, and tell me in as few words as you can, for I must do my work, else I'd stop with you altogether. Tell me; what can I do for you? What do you want me to do?"

"When I am dead, take this to your cousin's husband, St. John Aylott," said Mrs. Grant, giving her a small packet which she had hidden under her pillow. "He ought to help my boy."

"Oh!" said Jane, rubbing her nose.

"You said his wife was good and kind?" Harriet asked wistfully.

"Would be first-rate if not so rich," Jane answered tersely.

"Perhaps she would do something for him; would she, do you think, Jane?" weeping. "He ought to be brought up well; he ought, dear Jane!"

"Well, it would do her a world of good to

have something of the kind," philosophized Jane. "She leads too lazy and selfish a life for any worth that she has in her to continue, unless she is routed out. Yes, it will do her good. She is the kind of woman to expatiate on scarlet shoes and blue sashes—just the fair soft sort for babies; though she might do better. Yes," addressing Mrs. Grant, and speaking very earnestly, "I will give you my promise, and I'll tell you what I will do. I'll take or send the packet if you die—but perhaps you won't, you know, after all—and I'll ask Isola to bring up the baby. If she won't have him, and we can do no better for him, we'll bring him up—mamma and I—the best way we can; he shall share and share alike with us. So now don't cry, and cheer up, that's my good little creature! It was quite wise and sensible in you to make all these arrangements; and to tell you the truth, I did not think you had so much sense; but you may get all right yet, and to-night may be a crisis only, who knows?"

But the poor little woman shook her head, and said plaintively, "I am doomed, dear Jane; but

I am happier now than I was. I shall not see another sunset. How I wish this last had been a real sunset!"

"Ta, ta! such fads and fancies!" said Jane cheerily. "You'll come all right by-and-by. And now I'll go to my work, and when I've finished I'll come back and sit with you if you are not asleep. I'll send mamma up till I have done; she'll amuse you perhaps, if you don't let her talk too much. Now don't mope! crying don't do anybody good, but a deal of harm instead, especially when you want all your strength."

Saying which Jane shook the widow's hand—sideways—warmly, and patted her shoulder kindly—about the utmost limit of Jane Osborn's power of personal caressing. Then she went downstairs to write her article, and to tell mamma to go up to Mrs. Grant and sit a bit with the poor little thing, who was mopy to-night and looking awfully ill; bidding her at the same time not to talk too much, but just to sit quiet and watch her—she wasn't fit to bear much of any kind.

"My dear Jane, had you not better tell me what I am to say, like a good little girl?" said Mrs. Osborn with gentle satire.

"If it would do any good, or be of any use, mamma, I would," answered Jane tranquilly. "But if I told you what to say, you would probably say just the contrary, so I don't see much use in it."

"You are a most impertinent young woman!" retorted Mrs. Osborn angrily.

"Well, mamma, what good is there in asking things you don't want answered?" said Jane. "You should not have asked me if you do not want an answer."

"Don't be silly, Jane, and don't be impertinent," said Mrs. Osborn with dignity.

"Hadn't you better go to that poor little creature upstairs, and leave me to get my work done, instead of wasting your time and mine in quarrelling about nothing?" Jane said quietly; but added, with a certain weary accent she did not often let slip, "It does waste such a lot of time, all this kind of thing!"

"I'm sure, Jane, I don't begin it first!" said Mrs. Osborn tearfully.

"Well, never mind now who begins it first, do you end it now and go upstairs," said Miss Jane.

"That's all very well, Jane, to say never mind who begins when you are so ill-tempered as you are, and always quarrelling with me. You begin these things yourself, and then you say never mind who begins. But I do mind who begins, and I don't call that fair to lay all the blame on my shoulders when you are the one in fault!"

"Mamma!" cried Jane suddenly, with a certain expression and accent well-known to her mother; "will you go upstairs as I tell you, and leave me to my work?"

"Yes, Jane, yes," said Mrs. Osborn humbly; and fluttered away like a bird from the fowler.

"Poor mamma!" was Jane's unspoken thought as she settled herself to her writing, "what a pity it is she is so weak-headed, and only to be ruled by fear! If I was not harsh with her sometimes I should get nothing done, and we should just be ruined. But it ain't pleasant to one's own mo-

ther, and a good soul at bottom if she had only a little more sense."

Decidedly, what virtues soever Jane Osborn might possess, filial reverence was not among them.

The article was written, and well written too—Jane Osborn never "scamped her work" as she called it; it was folded in her rough untidy way, and laid on the hall slab to be given to the office boy when he should call; and then Jane prepared to go upstairs. But just as she was turning the angle Mrs. Osborn came running down—her cap half off her head, and her face as white as the weepers fluttering round it.

"Jane! Jane! come upstairs directly!" she said. "Send for the doctor—where's Mr. Norton—where's that girl of ours—she's always out of the way when she's wanted"—the girl was at her elbow—"go upstairs, Jane, and go for Mr. Norton and the doctor this very instant! Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do, and your poor papa not at hand with the stomach-pump if she is poisoned!"

Jane waited to hear no more. In another instant she was in Harriet Grant's room.

"What is it?" she said more gently than any one would have supposed Jane Osborn could have spoken, as she bent over the bed. "My poor woman!" she then said softly. She had no need to ask a second time what it was that had stolen into the room since she left, and that now lay in visible presence on the thin and wasted face. The very air about the bed told what had come; it wanted no skilled physician to say that here was death, and death too strong, too near, to be conquered now.

"Jane, is that you?" said the feeble voice, and the dark eyes dim with death lifted themselves wearily up. "I am so glad you are here!—it is all so dark, I cannot see you. Let me feel your hand—I am dying."

"Be brave!" whispered Jane, grasping her hand warmly. "It has to come to me too some day, my woman—and God is about us all!"

"Will God forgive me? I have been a great—great sinner, Jane!"

Tears filled the large grey steadfast eyes, and the square jaw trembled.

"Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest! You are going to your Father, Harriet. He will pardon and receive!"

"And my poor baby!"

"He shall be cared for. So long as I have sixpence or a hand to work he shall be protected!" was the fervent answer, made as an oath might have been made.

"Jane! my sister! take him to St. John Aylott! Open the packet I gave you. St. John is my brother, and he has cast me off!" whispered Harriet. Then she fell back in a swoon, and not all Jane's efforts could revive her.

When the morning rose clear and jocund over the silent streets, and just as the first rays gilded the house-tops, a soul went out into the great world of spirits, and Harriet Grant lay dead. Jane Osborn was by the bed holding in her arms the orphan child of St. John Aylott's sister, and Richard Norton stood by her mute and seemingly

tranquil, gazing steadily at the corpse of the long loved—the finally lost: but registering a vow to Heaven that St. John Aylott should pay for that night's work, and pay with what would be more than life to him.

CHAPTER II.

JANE OSBORN'S LETTER.

It seemed as if there was to be some confusion about the fate of poor Harriet Grant's boy: not by the coldness of friends, but by the jealousy of love. For when Jane told Mr. Norton what she had promised the mother, that gentleman peremptorily forbade her to make any such reference to St. John Aylott; he would do that himself, he said—he would see that the child was properly provided for. Meanwhile the Osborns were to keep him until such time as he could go down to Newfield, and see St. John personally; —they should be repaid all such moneys as they expended, and their trouble would be considered as well.

"Trouble!" sniffed Jane, "do you think we want to be paid for mere humanity, Mr. Norton? I do not think we are quite the folks to make capital out of a little act of commonplace Christian charity. If we were well off we'd take the child ourselves; but it would not be fair to him as he has so much grander claims. Not that I think poverty the worst of all things," she added tossing up her head; "but I am in a minority, and the world don't agree with me, I know."

"It would be a queer world if it did, Jane," was Mrs. Osborn's rejoinder.

This was on the day of the funeral, which Mr. Norton had conducted in the quiet, careful, self-controlled manner peculiar to him; when it was over coming back to Seymour Street for a talk with Jane Osborn about Harriet's boy, and to lay on her his commands not to take action, as he expressed it, until he should give permission.

"But I promised," said Jane remonstrating; "I took an oath to that poor creature that I would look after her child myself, and I must keep my word."

"You are keeping it best by attending to me," replied Richard Norton.

"I don't know about that," said Jane.

"And I do," was his answer. "You are showing your wisdom in allowing me to be the best judge of what is best for you to do. You really *must* be guided in this matter by me, Miss Osborn," emphatically.

"Yes, Jane," said Mrs. Osborn, "do let other people have a little influence over you, if your mamma has not; do be guided by wiser heads, for gracious sake!"

"And break my word!" said Jane; "I don't think that a very creditable kind of influence."

"Broken to the letter only, kept to the spirit," Mr. Norton urged. "You wish to do your poor friend a kindness, do you not?" with the air of a man propounding a mathematical problem. "Well, believe me, you will be doing her a great unkindness if you appeal to St. John Aylott. Yes," interrupting her, "I know exactly what you are going to say!—I know what you know, and a little more, Miss Osborn; and I

tell you again I am the person to manage this negotiation. If you interfere you will do more harm than good."

"That is what I am always saying, Jane!—you will do more harm than good!" cried Mrs. Osborn triumphantly. "How often have I begged and prayed of you not to interfere in things!—how often I have said, My dear Jane, if you interfere you will do more harm than good!—and now you see Mr. Norton repeats my words. Nothing can be plainer than what he says, nothing!"

"I will think of it," said Jane to Mr. Norton, ignoring her mother in that exasperating way of hers. "But I hate all these mysteries and hints, and working in the dark like moles and worms. I like to know what I am about, and to be above-board and honest."

"Quite right, my dear young lady; nothing can be better expressed; but now tell me what is there in this wish of mine that you should not touch a very delicate matter, where you do not know half the intricacies or the dangers—what

is there in this, I say, that is not above-board and honest?"

She shook her head. "I don't like it," she said, "but since you are so earnest about it, and it may be as you say, I'll think it over, and wait a day or two, Mr. Norton. If I am not satisfied then with what you are doing, I will take the thing into my own hands. I believe in honesty myself, and I don't believe in diplomacy or double-dealing."

"Jane! how can you be so rude?" cried Mrs. Osborn; "one would think you had been brought up in the streets, and had not had a lady for your mamma at all, you are so dreadfully rude and rough!"

"Oh, never mind," said Mr. Norton, with a cheerful kind of resignation to injury in his voice and manner: "I like to understand what people mean, and Miss Osborn makes herself intelligible."

"She might be intelligible in a more lady-like manner!" said Mrs. Osborn. "I hope I am intelligible, but I hope also that I am not rude!"

"Well, mamma, I am very sorry if I have offended Mr. Norton. I did not mean to do that, or to be rude either, but I must tell the truth; and if he is vexed I am very sorry, as I said before; but I can't help it," said Jane half penitently, half defiantly.

"And need not, my dear young lady," replied Richard Norton with the theatrical air of old-fashioned gallantry which he affected as what young ladies liked. He rose to go.

"Good gracious, Mr. Norton, how white you look!" cried Mrs. Osborn suddenly. "You are like a ghost! Can't I get you something?"

"I'll take a glass of water, if you please," he said in an altered voice. "Now you mention it, I do feel a little odd."

He sat down in the chair from which he had just risen, passed his hand once or twice across his forehead, wiped off the moisture standing cold and thick on his upper lip, fetched a deep sigh, tried to smile but could not, then fell back with drooping head and listless hanging arms—fainting. He was a man of good constitution and of

iron nerves, but the strain had been too much for him, and nature revenged herself for the force he had put upon her.

"There, Jane! see what you have done!" cried Mrs. Osborn excitedly. "I declare you have made the man faint by the way in which you have worried and annoyed him. You are as bad as that dreadful woman in the East, who used to scold her doctor till he fainted of a day—such cruel, heartless work I never saw!"

The swoon did not last very long, and in a short time Mr. Norton recovered sufficiently to go home, promising to send word in a day or two, and tell them what he had done about the child, and what had been arranged; Jane meanwhile uncomfortable, notwithstanding all his reasonings, and feeling that she had failed her promise and broken her word.

Days passed, and no news came from Richard Norton. Jane waited impatiently enough; but she waited loyally, as had been agreed on; though never quite satisfied with herself—holding the performance of her promise as higher in the hierarchy of

virtues than any degree of obedience to be compassed. At last, tired of waiting, anxious about the child, and not a little suspicious of Mr. Norton, she went to the office to hunt him up as she phrased it: when she found that he had not been there since Monday week—the day of the funeral—and that he was reported dangerously ill at his own home. The clerk said brain-fever; and he said only too truly; the poor fellow was lying between life and death, with the balance dipping down towards death.

"Now I must act for myself," said Jane. "I ought to have done so at the first, as I promised. No good is got by breaking one's word, whatever people may say."

She locked the door of the miserable little back parlour where she always wrote, and which had been her father's surgery—the scent of aloes and chamomile and scammony and rhubarb and all the other abominations which had filled the shelves and pigeon-holes still strong and pungent in the room—took a clean sheet of letter-paper, and wrote a long and earnest letter to

St. John Aylott, telling him what she knew, and entreating him to do something for the child left in her care. She wrote well because she felt strongly and had a pure motive, but she did not attempt anything like conciliation or persuasion. She put the truth and his duty nakedly before him; and when she had done this, she seemed to think she had done all that could be needed to determine an honest man's action. That any one should have to be flattered or manœuvred into doing his duty was something too abhorrent to Jane Osborn's vigorous code of morals to be accepted for an instant. So she wrote as she felt—warmly and earnestly, but peremptorily and dictatorially.

Mrs. Osborn knew neither the fact of this letter nor its contents. She would be of no use, thought Jane, and she might do a world of mischief; and as it was no business of hers she had no need to be consulted. Jane had long ceased to have any reliance on her mother's judgment. She had developed early and had gauged unflinchingly, and the result had come in the loss of

all filial respect and confidence, and the profound conviction that mamma was just a great baby who had to be taken care of, and watched, and kept out of mischief, and scolded at times—and pretty sharply too—when she did wrong: which was almost always, according to Jane's notions of things. She was her father's daughter, not her mother's, and had very little pity for the weakness she had not inherited. So she wrote without even telling her mother, still less asking her opinion as to the advisability of writing to St. John Aylott at all.

Then she did her own work and "Wyndham's," as she called him—interfered about the baby whom mamma was feeding with meat, and, as Jane said, it stood to reason that a baby six weeks old didn't want meat, and what was more shouldn't have it either; and she made her mother cry by her harshness of manner and the sharpness of her rebuke—in part also because she checked her in a favourite pastime; then she ate dry bread for supper before mamma began, because there was only a small quantity

of butter, and mamma was fond of butter; then she sat up till past two in the morning, doing extra work for very small pay, because the week's supplies were running short, and mamma wanted some little fid-fad on which she had set her heart; and then, next day, because she could not make up quite enough, she quietly pawned one or two little personals that she valued, that mamma might have her fid-fad and be content; and she did countless other things of the same kind, all unselfish, energetic, dictatorial, and unpleasant, instinct with noble virtues and marred by disagreeable faults, as was inherent in her whole nature.

But was it strange if this strong and capable woman, laden as she was with the weighty needs of life, showed more impatience than forbearance with feeble superficialities? Had she been as sweet as she was strong she would have been as patient as she was energetic; but Jane Osborn was an instance of how really heroic virtues may exist without beauty, and how neither strength nor truth, neither energy nor self-sacrifice can make a woman lovely

unless there be love as well. This one word made all the difference between her and Isola Aylott; and in this one want lay the basic blemish of Jane's character, and the marring by insufficiency of her else noble nature.

The post came in to Newfield at noon; and on this special day when Jane Osborn's letter came down, it found St. John Aylott by rare chance at home. The morose humour of the last few weeks had suddenly given place to-day to a feverish outburst half of love half of jealousy, uncertain, doubting, and distraught, and almost more embarrassing than his anger had been. Again and again he made Isola swear that she still loved him. He asked, till she was bewildered with his questionings and weary with her answers, if she was true to him as when she first married—true in heart, in thought, in wish?—he besought her in the piteous tones of a man famishing for a love denied to kiss him—only once—he would not ask her for more than only once; as if making an infliction as light as possible. And when

she stooped her sweet kind face and kissed his upturned to her so thirstily, he put his hand on her forehead to hold it back, so that he could see it better, saying in a hollow voice—

"Is this real, Isola?"

"What should it be if not real?" was her answer made with a timid smile.

"I do not know!" he sighed; "I seem to myself to know nothing now!"

It had been an agonizing morning for both; for who would not have pitied him thus making shipwreck of his happiness, and breaking his own heart while he wrung hers? If the sin lay with him, there also lay the deeper sorrow; and therefore so much greater need for pity and compassion. And Isola did pity him; not loftily and from the cold height of superiority, but with the tender self-abasement of a woman striving to restore the man she loved to his due place, and to shut her eyes to the depth of his descent.

She soothed him at last, and brought him back something of his former self; but when she

had quieted his nerves by her soft voice and gentle caresses, and replaced him on his pedestal by the tender little flatteries instinctive to a wife who wishes to be well with her husband, then he hought himself magnanimous that he had suffered himself to be so soothed, and took credit for having acted generously. Isola did not quite see it in that light, but she had learnt of late to think and discern in silence. At all events she was very glad of this beginning of a better understanding, and was too strong and patient to resent St. John's peculiarity of condescension where another man would have shown humility.

She was still tremulous with painful excitement—he still exulting in his good work of forgiveness—when the letter bag, that usually barren symbol of social relations, was brought in and given as in due form to St. John. He opened it, took out the 'Times,' and then a letter; which he read.

Isola chanced to raise her eyes to him as he read, and uttered a cry as she saw his face. It was a face with all the intellect and humanity

taken out of it, and only insanity and brute passion left.

"St. John!" she exclaimed, "dear St. John! what has happened?"

"Stand off, Isola!" he cried in a terrible voice as she went to him; "you and yours have ruined me!—you have been my curse and my destruction. Would to God I had never seen you!"

"St. John! how can you say such things to me, to your wife?" she said in a voice full of natural pathos and dignity.

"Wife!" he sneered, "you were once a wife, at least I thought you so, but now—"

"And now what am I if not a wife?" she said laying her hand on his arm and raising her eyes with as much determination as sorrow in them.

He met the look and faltered before it. He had never seen Isola's dignity before. His own eyes dropped, and the fire that was in them seemed to shrink and concentrate, but not to pale; only to contract and sink inward as if he was afraid.

"What it is best not to say," he answered, after a pause.

"I do not follow your thought, St. John," Isola said quietly but very firmly. "I do not know what you could have in your mind against me that it would be best not to say."

There was silence for a few moments. Then St. John, turning away his head and glancing up with his furtive look, said in a strange voice: "You had better not ask what I mean, Isola. These things are not to be said to women—men only understand them."

"Then if they may not be said openly, perhaps you will never hint at them to me again?" said Isola, still with the same manner of wounded pride. "Not even a husband has the right to insinuate an insult."

She spoke in a tone so foreign to her usual self, that St. John looked at her sharply as if to make sure that it was really she and not another who had spoken.

The letter was lying on the table, where St. John had flung it in the first moment of disgust, and Isola, glancing at it without thought, recognized the handwriting; and her face showed that she recognized it.

"You must not read my letters!" he said angrily, taking up the letter suspiciously.

"I was not reading it," she answered. "You know that I never read your letters. I only recognized the writing; it is from my cousin Jane."

"From your cousin the devil!" exclaimed Aylott St. John Aylott, the dean's religious grandson.

"St. John! how can you say such wicked things?" cried Isola passionately.

It was strange that with her too, as with him, the present reaction and severance was just in proportion to the fervour of their so late reconciliation.

"Of course *you* will uphold her!" he sneered. "The very fact that she annoys and insults me will be quite sufficient to obtain *your* patronage."

"No, but the fact that she is a good and noble girl ought to secure her against such language," said Isola; "and that she is my cousin ought to ensure her a certain amount of respect from my husband."

St. John rose. "Isola," he said in a slow measured tone, only the lurid flame in the lowered eyes, the contraction of the muscles of the mouth and brow, and the nervous plucking of his long fingers at the watch-guard in his waistcoat betraying his inner feeling, "to yourself I pay what respect you will allow me to pay, and when I fail it is your fault that you have not been able to make me respect you more—your fault remember, not mine! But no possible respect that I could pay you, shall ever make me receive into my house again that creature you call your cousin. If you want to know her, you may leave me and go to her; but so long as you live under my roof you shall obey me, and me only. Do you hear? she shall never cross my threshold—and if she does, I will have her kicked out by my footman. Her mother the same. So now you know my determination."

Saying which, he left the room before Isola could reply, and the next moment she heard him speaking with his ordinary well-bred cour-

tesy, and in his usual voice, to some one in the hall: and then the door opened and Gilbert Holmes and Harvey Wyndham entered the room.

"Will you excuse me for a moment?" said St. John Aylott; "I am engaged for a few moments, but my wife will entertain you till I return."

He laid a certain stress on the words, smiling as he spoke, which from any one else would have been natural and pleasant enough, but which from him betokened anything rather than pleasantness or naturalness.

"Oh, never mind us!" said Harvey Wyndham in his off-hand way; "you go and do your business—business always comes first you know—we can talk to Mrs. Aylott, if she'll have us for half an hour, till you have done."

"Certainly," said Isola, finding more than a little difficulty in speaking naturally, and looking at Gilbert when she did speak.

He was looking at her with those penetrating eyes of his, and from her he turned to St. John

and looked at him, in the same searching manner. He saw that something was amiss, and he did not like the expression in St. John's face; and having brought back with him from his wild life in California more than ordinary English chivalry towards women, and a quite impartial determination to protect them in times of need, no matter who might be the offender—father, husband, or brother—he was ready now, if occasion warranted, to take up the cudgels for Isola, and to punish her husband in any manner that presented itself, if it seemed to him that he wanted punishing. Of course nothing of this was shown, but perhaps the spirit of it made itself felt, and acted as a curb to St. John and as a support to Isola, who felt a kind of safety and reliance now that he was here, as if he had been a brother who would protect her in case of need. It was not a conscious feeling by any means; merely a vague sentiment; but strange from her to any one, and specially strange to a man so lately and so slightly known as yet, as Gilbert Holmes. Had she been conscious that she held him as a protection

against her husband, she would have been terrified of herself; but the beginnings of things are insidious, and when troubles come into married life, they generally come by crevices so small and masked that no care is taken to prevent their filtering through. Hitherto St. John had been Isola's loving jailer, from whose overweight of love she needed the release of circumstance; now he was becoming the tyrannous enemy against whom she needed the protection of friendship.

The men sat and talked each in his own way, while St. John went into the library to write to Jane, refusing her request, repudiating her claim, denying her story, and peremptorily forbidding any recurrence of an attempt so scandalous in its barefaced imposture. It was a very prelatic letter indeed, and he was quite in good humour with himself when it was done. He would have liked to have read it to Isola; it would have been pleasant to have heard his own voice giving due emphasis to the big words, and rounding off the Ciceronian periods with the stately intonation

befitting. But Isola was the last person to whom he could have read that letter; besides, she was in disgrace, and must be made to feel her position. The highest favour he had hitherto accorded her, or indeed that he could accord to any woman, was to suffer her to play chorus to his monologue; but now she was cut off from even that participation. So his prelatic answer to Jane Osborn was sent unread, and Isola, in the drawing-room between Gilbert Holmes and Harvey Wyndham, knew nothing of the storm that was preparing.

CHAPTER III.

ATÉ.

THE ball had been tossed over to the Hermitage this time, and the Hall folks had come to the "young people" for their day's diversion. It was a glorious day, rich warm and still as a summer's day should be—a day which sent the kine beneath the trees for shade, or knee-deep in the pools for coolness—a day which woke up all the dreaming creatures lying with soft and crumpled wings beneath the bark or within the folded leaves, till the air was loud and voiceful with their multitudinous hum—a day when the heat-mist quivered over the earth like a thin grey cloud flickering and waving with its own heat—when

things strange and shy came out from their hiding places and looked about them curiously—when great brown beetles trampled through the narrow grass blades like elephants crashing through the jungle, while smaller ones, lustrous and spotted, would follow with lighter steps like lions or tigers in the wake—when huge white spiders, black-beaded, wove their webs for the filmy flies, yellow and blue and green, which spangled the flowers—when lady-birds dotted the leaves like coral beads—and when the moths and butterflies and burnished dragon-flies came forth in painted multitudes like prismatic bubbles thrown off by nature from her seething cup of life. It was a day of exquisite beauty and of infinite delight; and Isola felt as if she did treacherously somehow in that she was not quite in unison with the boundless happiness about her. But the spell of discord still hung over the Aylott household, and Isola sought in vain for the counter charm that would remove it.

It was indeed a vain search as things were; for not only was St. John irritated against her

for having accepted an independent allowance—an offence he could not get over anyhow—and for being connected, though so remotely, with the terrible letter and revelation from Jane Osborn; but beside and beyond these, so long as Marcy's influence lasted there would be no peace for Isola and no real union with her husband. For partly in the need of excitement and partly for her insatiable vanity and coquetry, Marcy had thrust herself more and more between them, and had now become that bitterest curse which can befall a wife—the standard by which she is measured and declared to fall short.

Whatever Marcy was that Isola was not; and just in proportion to the fascination of the one was St. John Aylott's anger and annoyance with the other. Then, because Isola did not ask him to forgive her for offences she had never committed, and because she did not praise him for virtues he did not possess—he became more angry still; and as his temper towards her hardened, and his injustice deepened, and his fault-finding increased, so did she grow colder, less expansive, and more

retreating, fearing always to offend him, yet unwilling to do the only thing that could restore him—namely, abase her soul before him. So things were going very badly at the Hermitage, in that quiet manner of spiritual disintegration known only too well to married homes.

They made quite a large party to-day, riding along the leafy lanes to Robin Hood's Seat, one of the show places in the neighbourhood; Isola for the most part with Gilbert Holmes; Marcy appropriating St. John as hers by right, but longing to appropriate Gilbert too; Rosa Varley made happy by Harvey's rather cavalier not to say disdainful attentions; while Mr. Tremouille and the Joyces jogged on in a triad of staid content. This was their usual manner of combining now; Harvey having dropped any special attention to Isola as manifestly telling against his chances with Marcy, and Isola herself caring only for Gilbert's society, failing her husband's. She often wished that she had had a sister whom Gilbert Holmes might have loved and married; so that he might then have been her real brother

and entitled to the brother's privilege of advice and admonition. She was getting to like him so affectionately!—with no dangerous fervour nor languishing sentimentality, but with such a hearty strong affectionate respect!—with such a strange feeling of sisterliness, and likeness, and deepest spiritual sympathy! It was a friendship in itself ennobling and improving; but it had one dangerous element in it—the difference of character between her husband and her friend, and how to the larger nature was naturally paid the greater reverence.

They were now riding a little way behind the others, and were talking of that inexhaustible theme, the right of freedom or the righteousness of obedience.

"It would be pleasant to be a Catholic," said Isola with a certain accent of weariness in her voice; "all one's difficulties would be over then, and there would be nothing to do but to obey; and obedience is easy if one is convinced that it is right."

"Most women feel the same want," answered

Gilbert; "only a few of the more exceptional sort are able to think for themselves. It is this need of direction which makes them such easy converts to Rome, where they have a man divinely appointed, and infallible, to guide and teach them."

"And there are times when this would be such a blessing!" she said.

"Failing that, you must walk by the light that is in you," said Gilbert. "You must live your own life fearlessly, and not think that sitting in an easy chair and being wheeled along another man's tramroad is the way to heaven. We have all to work out our own salvation in the best way we can."

"That is just the point—what you said i the beginning," Isola answered very earnestly. "Ought we to walk by the light that is in us, or to submit to outside authority?"

"I am afraid I should be too much on the side of freedom to suit the great mass of English people," said the Californian gravely. "I have no great respect myself for Griseldas male or

female—as men, they are contemptible; as women, immoral."

"But there is the duty of self-sacrifice."

"Just so; but self-sacrifice is not slavishness. To be of any value at all it is the voluntary gift of strength; when once the element of fear or force comes into it, it is then mere cowardice or slavery."

"Who can define the difference?" asked Isola sadly.

"Honest thought can always define differences, and casuistry and sophistry will always make them," Gilbert said.

"Sometimes I get a little bewildered with so many differences of opinion about things—say, for instance, the amount of obedience to be paid by women to men—wives to husbands. There is a cousin of mine, on the one side, who despises anything even like complaisance in women, and here is Mrs. Joyce, who holds that we are born into the world only to be the slaves and shadows of men. I don't think she gives us even independent souls!" she added warmly. "And how

can we find out the truth between two such extremes?"

"By avoiding each alike, and being neither a Griselda nor an Amazon. You know the old proverb, *In medio?* Is there no mean between defiance and slavishness?—no broad highway between barren crags and valleys of mud?—no manner of life but fighting with spear and lance, or kissing the feet of private popes at home?"

"Still it is a difficulty," persisted Isola.

"Difficulty! Why, every question of moral and social life is a difficulty, Mrs. Aylott; we have not anchored ourselves yet to any tower of brass that I am aware of. The only certainty that I have come to is to do the right according to my own conscience, without caring for the opinion of others. And till I learn that souls have sex, I should offer the same rule of guidance to women as to men."

"And he must be right," thought Isola, taking grateful comfort from the counsel.

"Why, cousin Gilbert!" cried Marcy as they rode up to the rest of the party now assembled

on the brow of the hill, "what have you been saying to Mrs. Aylott? She looks like a peony! You are as good as rouge and a hare's foot to her! I wish you would give me such a lovely colour—by the same means," she added a little slowly.

"It would be more to the purpose to give you a little wisdom, pretty Marcy!" laughed Gilbert good-humouredly: St. John flashing out by way of scornful rejoinder, "Perhaps Miss Tremouille shows greater wisdom than those who presume to teach it," looking at Isola angrily.

"I hope, Simmy, that young Mrs. Aylott is not getting up a flirtation with this Mr. Holmes, as she did with Mr. Wyndham," whispered Mrs. Joyce austerely. "I never much liked the look of her, I must own. She is too independent for my ideas of a good wife; but if she compromises herself or runs away, or does anything with Mr. Holmes, what an awful thing it will be!"

A less correct woman than Mrs. Joyce would have hesitated perhaps before she jumped to such a tremendous conclusion from so small a

premise; but perhaps her bold imagination was only a proof of the audacity of innocence, not of the impurity of malice.

By this time they had all dismounted from their horses, and had gathered about the seat; which was a rock set up on the top of the hill, and hollowed out into the rude likeness of a chair. Seat and sides were covered with initials after the manner of English show-places, and Harvey Wyndham soon set himself to add to the allusive literature already abounding.

"Put Rosa's with yours," whispered Marcy coaxingly. "It will please her so much, poor thing!"

"No," he answered in the same tone, "I will be bracketed with you, or not at all."

"With me indeed! with I. A. you mean!" she said laughing shrilly. "Mrs. Aylott is the one you are all mad about, Mr. Wyndham, not poor little me." She shrugged her shoulders expressively; then added pouting, "And I think it too bad when she is married, and to such a dear as that St. John!"

She said this just as St. John came up, and he overheard her. She meant that he should.

Then Harvey, to turn the conversation which was becoming dangerous, began talking in his fluent frothy way of the old times when outlaws lived under the greenwood tree, and monks and barons ruled the people between them. He talked as he generally did talk with a very plethora of words; but his ideas were neither new nor true, and as shallow as they were sounding. But it was the kind of talk that imposed itself on St. John as the right thing—eminently the right thing—that seemed to Rosa Varley like the golden utterances of a god, and that, had it not been for Gilbert, would have caught even Isola, as bower birds are caught by tinsel, surely believing it to gold.

He went on for some time expatiating on the past, with mock Carlylese enthusiasm, till he was stopped by Gilbert's saying quietly, "Yes, but, Wyndham, you know that all this is mere bosh. You know that the world has tried both outlaws under the greenwood tree as you

say, and monks standing at the convent gates to feed the poor, and having tried has gone past and rejected them. We do not want the pretence of either revived. If a thing does not exist vitally in the minds and faith of a nation, the mere appearance of it is a sham, to be cut down and cast for firewood into the furnace."

"Just so! just so!" said Harvey Wyndham hastily; "Thor's hammer of truth, hey?"

"Better than Loki's disguises!" said Gilbert.

"Goodness! that sounds like a fairy story!" said Marcy Tremouille with an air of childish delight.

"Perhaps it is one, cousin Marcy," replied Gilbert.

"Ah! now you are talking riddles," she said shaking her head. "I am only a goose you know, Mrs. Aylott is the clever thing, and can talk book, as my old nurse used to say."

"I did not know that my wife was going to develop into a pedant," said St. John. "One of the most unpleasant characters in the world to me is that of a blue-stocking," he added, speaking to no one in particular.

Consequently for a moment no one answered him. Then Mrs. Joyce said demurely, intending Isola to take the hint to herself and apply it; "A woman ought to be all that her husband wishes, and nothing that he does not wish. That is the only safe guide for us to follow."

Isola looked at Gilbert involuntarily. It was a perfectly innocent and candid look, simply referring to their late conversation, but the young wife was in a company not disposed to accord her any credit for innocence, and to St. John, Mrs. Joyce, and Marcy, that look was a fault which very little more would have made a crime.

The conversation than become general, and soon after they all remounted and rode down the hill again, in the direction of Newfield. Harvey made frantic efforts to shake off Rosa Varley and secure Marcy as his companion; but Marcy, pouting with Gilbert who did not heed her, would let no one ride with her save St. John; and when he essayed Isola, perhaps hoping to make Marcy jealous, she shrank from the literary handy man as truthful people do shrink

from wind-bags when once that wind-bag quality has become known. So they returned in the order by which they had come; and both Marcy and St. John Aylott believed they had griefs—the one against her cousin, and the other against his wife.

So ended the excursion to Robin Hood's Seat; a day which became the most memorable of all in Isola's life—which saw the beginning of a new order of things, and the end once and for ever of what had hitherto constituted the character of the Aylott home. How little she thought of all that would happen before nightfall when she saw the morning break over the distant hills to-day!

Dinner was over and they were sitting on the lawn at the Hermitage watching the sun go down beneath a dome of clearest gold, most of them in that placid state of quietude which comes after a day's good riding, with the pleasant dinner to follow, when a fly drove up to the gates. They could just see the road beyond the shrubbery drive from where they sat, but

in general there there was not much to see save an occasional hay-cart or so; and a fly therefore, whether private or hired, was a phenomenon.

"A carriage to us!" cried Isola. "What an extraordinary thing! Who can it be, I wonder!"

Her courage failed her a little as spoke. Was it any trouble from her side? The house had sides now, and she was nervously anxious to keep hers free from blame.

The gates swung back as she spoke, and the fly came lumbering up the drive and stopped at the portico, which was to the south side of the lawn, so that, sitting where they did, facing the west, they could see all that passed on the gravel sweep before the pillars. The footman came out as the machine stopped; the door was opened and the old-fashioned steps let down; and then descended a tall and angular figure draped in black and holding something that looked like a mummy in her arms. The sunlight falling on her in floods of ruddy gold showed wreaths of heavy auburn hair tumbling in dishevelled cascades far

down her neck—it showed a square-set freckled face, with a rigid look on it, as one who had work to do and who had come to do it—it showed a frayed and crumpled gown, a torn and shabby shawl, a battered bonnet tied awry, and fair long gloveless hands; and then these component parts revealed themselves in their totality, as Jane Osborn with her swinging stride and determined air came straight across the lawn, and into the midst of the group assembled there in all the graceful luxury of a well-dressed English dinner-party. Tossed and tumbled with her railway journey; fretted with the care of a young infant, an occupation in every way so uncongenial to her; hardened by the contest with her mother, that had come when abruptly bid to give up the child to whom her woman's heart had begun to cleave with the old tender if so foolish maternal love; and braced to a contest more difficult still; Jane Osborn came upon them like a creature from another sphere altogether. She might have been a spectre for the strange confusion and conster-

nation that she caused; to herself she felt like Até coming up with the victim she was appointed to pursue.

Isola rose to meet her, her heart beating fast with mingled dread and pleasure; not knowing what evil she was bringing, yet glad to see again the woman who had stood for at least a time in the position of teacher and guide.

"Dear Jane!" she said affectionately; and then she added ingenuously, "What has brought you here?"

"I want to see your husband, cousin Isola," said Jane in a loud voice, fixing her eyes on St. John.

"You want to see me—what do you want with me?" he asked coldly, rising too and looking at her over his shoulder with his furtive glance.

"I want to know what you are going to do with this child of yours," said Jane in clear ringing tones that seemed to Isola as if they must have been heard in the remotest corner of the house, and for miles round, they were so harsh, so loud, so penetrating. A mist came

over her eyes; in her ears was nothing but the deafening tumult of her own loud pulses; she stood as if struck to stone, but her face looked grander than Gilbert Holmes had seen it yet, for the almost majesty of silent sorrow that was on it. He came to her and led her away to a seat, a little apart; but he had to support her as she walked, else she would have stumbled and fallen.

Fortunately St. John and the rest were too much absorbed in Jane Osborn and the baby to notice what was doing to the side.

Of course but one interpretation seemed possible, yet it was strangely characteristic of each how the supposition wrought.

"How the deuce did the boy Jane get mixed up with a pretty peccadillo of that kind?" muttered Harvey wonderingly. "Friend Jane was not the follow to be tempted, or to fall if she was tempted—friend Jane!" and he laughed outright at the thought, adding between his teeth "Unlucky beggar!" as his commentary St. John-ward.

Mr. Tremouille looked on placidly enough; he had seen too much of West Indian society to draw his moral lacets very tight, and now sat mentally framing a string of philosophic commonplaces by way of excuses.

The Joyces were shocked of course; but Mrs. Joyce felt inclined to throw the blame somehow on Isola; "What a pity it was that she was childless if her husband liked babies!" she said, in a a tone of condemnation, as if childlessness was a moral fault, to be judged with righteous severity.

Marcy said that she could not understand it: she supposed the child was Isola's and that Jane was the nurse. "But then why is every one so angry, Mrs. Joyce?" she half whispered; "why should not Mrs. Aylott have a baby?" and Rosa Varley turned away her head and blushed, feeling herself suddenly transported into most objectionable company.

St. John naturally understood something of the drift of all their various thoughts. Poor fellow! he was as much shocked at the look of things as all the rest, and if he could have

annihilated Jane and the baby together he would have done so without much loss of time.

"What have I to do with the child?" he said angrily. "What is the little wretch to me?"

"If you have nothing to do with it, who has?" answered Jane. "It is your sister's child, and you are the only relation she has left, so who is responsible if you are not?"

"I deny the whole story!" cried St. John passionately; "I have no sister!"

"You have not now, but you had a fortnight ago," said Jane sturdily; "and you knew that you had, for she told me all about the letter, poor thing! Repudiating a woman for a low marriage don't get rid of blood ties or their obligations, St. John Aylott! If your sister did run away with a circus-rider, poor soft, foolish thing!"—here there was a visible movement as if an electric shock had ran through the assembly—"she was your sister all the same, to the end of her life. You can't get out of it however hard you may try!" defiantly.

"My sister died ten years ago!" said St. John vehemently.

"She ran away from home ten years ago, you mean, and you only choose to say she died," retorted Jane.

"I am not to be deceived by a story like this, carrying imposture on the face of it!" cried St. John.

"Now don't talk rubbish, Mr. St. John!" said Jane. "I am not the woman to be taken in by imposture of any kind—I have seen too much of the world for that!—and this is no imposture, look at it how you will. The poor dead creature, the mother of this child, was your sister"—with a heavy positive emphasis—"and if you don't believe me, or rather won't believe me, ask Mr. Norton. He knew who she was and came to see her constantly—was with her when she died—and knew what she told me of herself."

"If that is true, why did not Mr. Norton write to me?" cried St. John. "Why does he not come to me now?"

"Well, he can't very well come just now," Jane answered coolly, "seeing that he is laid up in

bed with brain fever and not thought likely to live. But you can find out for yourself that he used to visit her perpetually, and I know supplied her with money; he ordered the funeral and did all that was necessary—all that you ought to have done, Mr. St. John, but I suppose he thought it of no use to appeal to you. I am not so timid."

"You have made up your story very well, Miss Osborn," said St. John with a short laugh; "but I don't believe it."

"Because you don't want to believe it!" cried Jane passionately, speaking in a storm of words; "because you are a cold selfish fellow, and are afraid of that wonderful name of yours getting tarnished if it was known that your sister had made a bad marriage. For she was married after a time," she added maliciously; and again the small group assembled on the lawn quivered as if struck. "You need not be afraid; this little man is legitimate; I have a copy of the marriage certificate in my pocket. Harriet Aylott and James Grant married at St. Pancras just

six years ago. She gave it to me to show you if you were inclined to doubt. You see she knew you, Mr. St. John! And I have too a daguerreotype of your father the incumbent of Greythorpe; and a miniature of your grandfather the dean; and a locket with your mother's and her own initials on it; and there are some letters from you to her when you were at Eton and she was at Madame Dashwood's; and some of your father's to her, and one from your mother—misspelt. And there is no kind of doubt about the relationship or the identity. She was your sister sure enough, and this is your nephew just as surely; so what will you do with him? His name is Reginald Aylott Grant, and he has been registered and baptized according to law; and all I want to know now is—what do you intend to do?" Here she paused for breath and to toss back her hair.

"Nothing," said St. John, and turned on his heel. He always fought best when he did not face his opponent.

"Isola! where are you? Why don't you

speak!" cried Jane. "You have only to refuse like your husband and I will go back to London at once, and take the child with me. Mamma and I can bring him up, and will to the best of our power, poor little man! It is not because I want to get rid of him that I have come down, but because I thought it my duty to do so, as you are so much better off than we are, and folks value money in this world! What do you say? the decision lies with you."

Isola left her place—her stony dumbness had passed now—and came up to Jane; the two cousins standing side by side.

"I did not know that St. John had a sister at all," she said in a low voice. "I knew nothing of her—nothing whatever."

"She died just a fortnight ago at our own house," said Jane. "That was the Mrs. Grant I asked you to help; don't you remember? I did not know then that she was your husband's sister, else I would have acted very differently. I did not know it until a few hours before she died, when she told me the whole story."

"Poor little woman! And so she is dead!" said Gilbert in a low voice partly to himself. "I remember how that ruffian of hers used to boast of her family and specially of her grandfather. And now I see the likeness," glancing to St. John; "now I know the whole story!"

"Mrs. Grant was Honor Wilson's heir," said Harvey to him in an aside. "Here is a romance and a mystery somehow!"

"What will you do?" asked Jane again.

"Take the child and keep it," said Isola, taking the child into her arms and holding it against her bosom.

"I forbid it—you shall not!" cried St. John. "Give it back to that woman, Isola! I will have no beggar's brats here!"

"I cannot, St. John—I will not!" Isola answered. "He is your nephew and you ought to take him."

She spoke quietly, but with a certain distinctness of accent which showed that, right or wrong, that something which we call conscience was roused in her, and that she was prepared to sa-

crifice even her husband's love rather than yield what she felt it vital to the right to maintain.

St. John's face grew livid. The same spasmodic passion that Isola had seen convulse it before passed over it again; and when he drew close to her with his clenched hand brought up to his breast, the three gentlemen rose at the same moment, and Gilbert went over to her and stood near her, while Mr. Tremouille stood by St. John. Harvey, thinking the fewer witnesses the better if there was to be a row, asked Rosa and Marcy to go with him to the croquet-ground on the side-lawn. He said to them that he took them away because it was not a pleasant scene for them to witness at all; perhaps though he had another motive.

"Isola, give back that child!" said St. John in a low concentrated voice.

"I cannot, St. John," she answered.

"It was left to her care," said Jane; "do you expect her to have no conscience, Mr. St. John?"

"Let her have her way, Aylott!" said Mr. Tremouille in a soothing but half-authoritative

manner. "She is right. If the thing is a forgery you can repudiate afterwards, prosecute and play the deuce with them all; but if it is true, there will be no end of a scandal if you refuse the child. I suppose the father is dead?" to Jane.

"How could I appeal to the uncle—and such an uncle!—if he wasn't?" snapped Jane. "Why should the mother have left it to him and my cousin if there was any one else to care for him?"

"Be guided by my advice, Aylott," urged Mr. Tremouille; "your wife is right."

"Right!" said St. John with an angry glare at Isola; "conduct like this right!—conduct like this!" he repeated, "against all the laws of God and man! Disobeyed—contradicted—right!" He spoke spasmodically, with difficulty repressing himself so as not to take the child by the throat and tear it from his wife's arms; if indeed he would not rather take her by the throat instead and force her to give up her charge.

"Women will be strong-headed at times," said Mr. Tremouille soothingly, "and we must

humour them, poor things. Your wife has no little ones of her own you see, and all this is only instinct, and of a true kind. I can see by the way she holds the little fellow that she will make a good mother to him. Come! come! take my advice. I am an older man than you; let her have her head and save the scandal!"

There was a dead silence when Mr. Tremouille finished speaking. St. John was looking moodily on the ground, biting his nails and knitting his brows. Isola still held the child lovingly pressed against her bosom, and Jane and Gilbert were by her side.

"Bravo, Isola!" whispered Jane. "You are the trump I thought you! I knew that I might trust you!"

But Isola did not hear her. The child was in her arms, and her will was as strong as ever; but her eyes were fixed on her husband with a strange look of mingled love and defiance; and the look expressed her heart. She loved him still, but the unquestioning obedience hitherto paid him was consciously broken through once for all.

It was the moment of a new birth to her; and the Isola of former days was dead for ever.

"I will not reject the child to-day," then said St. John, speaking with his eyes still on the ground. "As you desire to keep it, Isola, I yield to your wish for the present. I will investigate the matter closely. I thought my sister was dead; and it does not seem to me very clear yet that she was this Mrs. Grant I hear spoken of. When Mr. Norton is well he must account to me for his share in this conspiracy." Here he raised his eyes, flaming with sharp and sudden anger. "Till then, do as you like."

He turned away as he said this, and entered the house; feeling as if he had left all his youth and happiness and repute, all the summer sunshine and the serenity of home behind him—as if he was to go henceforth through life, beggared, desolate, and dishonoured, in one unending winter of despair. Poor St. John Aylott! No one ever wounded himself more madly, more passionately, or so causelessly as he! Grant that all this was folly—but is not folly to be pitied as

much as sin?—for are not both the well-springs of sorrow?—the very roots and fastenings of human suffering?

When St. John went in, Harvey came back, Rosa close to his side, and Marcy following, as she generally did, just a foot's pace behind. This habit of following her companion, not walking evenly abreast, was quite one of her characteristics, and a very expressive one. As indeed all small habits would be found to be characteristic and expressive if we cared to note and trace them.

"Now that the weighty matter is disposed of, we can come to the light!" laughed Harvey, going up to Jane and offering his hand.

"Ah, Wyndham, is that you? I saw you as I came on to the lawn, and then you levanted," said Jane.

She turned her large eyes suddenly and steadily on Marcy and Rosa, and looked at both as a person looks at a picture, coldly, critically, yet with interest.

"I thought it best to get out of the way," he

answered. "These little family matters are always managed best with fewest witnesses."

"Not always," said Jane drily, remembering the motive force that at last influenced St. John. "The fear of the world helps the right sometimes."

"Well! how do you get on?" he asked, "I hear all sorts of grand things of you from Smith. He says you are as good as a man on the paper, and the only woman he has ever employed that he can rely on.

"Does he?" Jane said, pushing back her hair and looking almost girlishly pleased. "I would rather hear that than any compliment that could be paid me. I am glad he is satisfied anyhow. I do my best I know, but if my best was only bad, that would be no satisfaction to him!"

"I am very much obliged for what you have done for me," said Harvey in an excessive manner—the very excess implying that it was not she who had done so much as he who was so generously grateful for little.

"Oh, don't speak of that!" cried honest Jane,

lifting up her good sincere face with quite a pained expression on it; "you have made me, Wyndham, and if I worked for you to the last day of my life it would be only what I owe you. For without you where should I have been now?"

"Well, perhaps I was of a little use to you in the beginning," said Harvey; "but you would have soon made your own way. It was only at the first that I was of any good to you."

"The first is the whole very often," returned Jane, looking into his face with affectionate gratitude.

"Now, dear Jane, come into the house and rest after your journey," said Isola, as if waking from a sleep.

"No, thank you, Isola, I am going back directly," returned Jane. "I told mamma I should be back by the next train. Poor soul! she wanted to come herself, but I would not let her; she would have spoilt everything if she had, and we had an awful row this morning before I got her pacified at all. So I must be back at once, else she will be in hysterics or something like that.

I have brought all that belongs to the little man, and the few things that belonged to his mother, and you must do your best with him, Isola—and mind you don't overfeed him or play silly tricks like most women. I don't think you will though," approvingly.

"I will try to do my best," said Isola quite humbly, holding up the child to her face.

"I said you were the sort for babies!" said Jane a little disdainfully. "Lord! how queer, and with good brains too!" she added to herself. "Isola!" she then asked suddenly, "who is that dark die-away thing speaking to Wyndham now?"

"Marcy Tremouille—the daughter of the old gentleman by the sumach. Gilbert Holmes's cousin," answered Isola.

"What is she like?" Miss Jane inquired abruptly. "She is pretty, but like a barber's dummy. I hate barber's dummies! Has she an ounce of intellect in her?"

"She is not very clever," said Isola, "but I think she is good-natured."

"Cruel and sly," was Jane's emphatic verdict. "Pretty, a fool, and bad. Wyndham will never be such a donkey, surely!"

"Such a donkey as what?" asked Isola.

"Never mind: it was nothing," snapped Jane. "Who's that fair girl? She's an out-and-out goose I should say by the look of her, and awfully in love with Wyndham."

Isola laughed. "Poor Miss Varley!—I believe she is!" she said.

"She'll not hold her ground," said Jane tossing up her head, "Wyndham hates lymph, I know. There! the baby's waking, and it's his feeding time, and past. Milk and water remember Isola, with a little sugar, and made lukewarm. No farinaceous food or meat or rubbish—only milk and water."

"Why, Jane, you are quite a nurse!" laughed Isola.

"Oh, I'll write a manual on bringing up by hand!" she answered; "and I'd do it better than half the old mother Gamps who have done nothing else all their lives."

"Poor pet!" said Isola, as the baby opened his dark blue eyes and fixed them on her face. And then she began to coo and rock him backwards and forwards; and still keeping her face bent down to his, she passed through the window into her house, Jane following her with the patent feeding-bottle in her hand like a new kind of hookah.

Gilbert Holmes, an instinctive man fond of seeing women with babies, was looking after her with something almost like sadness on his face if with much that was admiration, when Marcy came up to him in her childish manner.

"Tell me what it has all been about, cousin Gilbert!" she said, laying her hand on his arm prettily.

"Well! come with me and I will explain it," he answered smiling, taking her to the seat where he had been sitting with Isola.

"My goodness!" cried Marcy when she had ended, "then it is not Isola's child after all. How funny!"

CHAPTER IV.

DRIFTING.

THAT adoption of the baby put the seal to the Aylott estrangement. Henceforth St. John seemed to regard himself as virtually divorced, with no duties towards his wife, either to pay or to receive. He lived at the Hall, and whenever Isola remonstrated—as she did sometimes—he would answer bitterly, "You have only yourself to thank for all that has happened, Isola; I told you how it would be, but you preferred your own way to my love; so now you must abide by your choice and make the best of it."

Saying which he would go off to Marcy, with whom he would spend the day between com-

plaints and compliments—anathemas against the child and admiration of the girl. Compliments and admiration which meant no more, and which she knew meant no more, than her own silly coquetry—simply so much drift-weed floating idly to whatever rock came handiest.

Of course the bystanders saw which way things were going. Harvey Wyndham did for one, and owed St. John a grudge for monopolizing the heiress, and weakening his own chance by just so much devotion as he showed. He made a vow to himself, more than once, that he would pay St. John Aylott out some day for this; and meanwhile waited smilingly, until the winning colour should turn up. He was a man with a good business head, and had never yet lost a chance by over-precipitancy; and as Marcy Tremouille was still on the cards, he did not choose to throw away the game until convinced that she was unattainable. Else maybe Isola would have been made the object of his attentions at this moment, and St. John's whip of snakes be countered by one of scorpions.

Gilbert Holmes too saw the course of events, though even more as a mere bystander than Harvey himself. He was an out-of-doors man for his own part, and did not get much mixed up with drawing-room life; but he saw enough to make him uneasy for the beautiful young wife, his new friend, and he was often perplexed concerning Marcy. Was she the innocent child she assumed to be, or was she crafty, vain, and selfish, as he sometimes feared? She did not love St. John Aylott—of that he had some small personal reasons to be convinced—why then did she peril her own reputation, as well as ruin poor Isola's happiness, for the paltry vanity of holding a married man in her chains? Gilbert had been too long used to an inartificial state of society to be well able to cope with the small intrigues and smaller motives of such a nature as Marcy's; so, not being able to settle things to his own satisfaction, he let them alone in the rather sanguine belief that they would settle themselves.

Marcy did not want him to leave them alone. On the principle of the unattainable being ever

the greatest good, cousin Gilbert Holmes was more to her than all the rest, precisely because he was the one who came least about her. What were St. John and Harvey compared to him? The one was just an amusement, and the occasion on which to expend her jealousy of a pretty woman and her "dramatic instincts," which a coarser nomenclature would have called love of making mischief. The other was an admirer—of course—for whose devotion she would not give the smallest ringlet of her raven tresses. But cousin Gilbert was different. To subdue that calm strong nature by the might of her flimsy charms—to bring into her list of petty fetch-and-carry slaves the *anax andrōn* whom nobler women than she were content to reverence, seemed to Marcy the worthiest object of her ambition under present circumstances, and the largest triumph to be compassed. As yet it was a triumph by no means compassed, nor seemingly on the way to be compassed; and do what she might—laugh, coax, pout, flatter, caress,—no matter what the weapon taken from her feminine armoury—cousin Gilbert

remained impenetrable, and Marcy's transparent love-making fell flat and without response. Then she would revenge herself by flirting outrageously with St. John Aylott in the hope of making Gilbert jealous. She might as well have sprinkled rose-water on a granite rock in the hope of dissolving it to sand!

"I believe that you hate me, cousin Gilbert!" she said one day to him irritably, when he would not take up some pretty challenge she had cast down.

"That is nonsense, Marcy," he answered gravely. "How do I show that I hate you?"

"In every way!" she pouted.

"Which means in nothing," he said laughing.

"Yes, in every way, cousin Gilbert! I never knew any one so cross and cold to me as you are."

"Why, what would you have, Marcy?" said Gilbert earnestly. He knew so little of the coquetry of women—he could so ill fathom the shallows of a false and pretentious nature!

"I want you to like me," she said creeping up to him with that undulating supple grace so cha-

racteristic of her; "I want you to like me —oh! just as well as you like Isola Aylott."

"I would like you as well if you were as straightforward as she is," said Gilbert. "I can understand Mrs. Aylott, and I cannot always understand you, Marcy."

"It is not my fault if you are stupid," flashed out Marcy impetuously.

"Certainly not," Gilbert answered as if he was answering something rational.

"Cousin Gilbert, you are odious—I hate you!" cried Marcy, and burst into a torrent of tears—real tears this time, not pretended ones. And then she ran out of the room, and Gilbert, much wondering at the whole little scene, saw her no more till luncheon-time, when they met again alone, for a few minutes before the others came in.

"Marcy, what was the matter with you this morning?" began Gilbert, taking her hand in his. He had been thinking over her tears and reproaches, and though by no means a vain man, they had both stirred and flattered him. "Why did you cry?"

He looked at her very tenderly. He was really sorry that the poor little thing should have been so much distressed. She was a pretty little kittenish thing, and perhaps all that he did not like in her, and could not quite understand, was only playfulness and simplicity—perhaps she was after all a mere child, as she often said of herself, and he was inclined to judge her too harshly. He looked at her very tenderly indeed; he was quite near to loving her, and saying so. But Marcy, who wanted nothing less than an affair *au sérieux,* took fright at his earnest face, and coquettishly replied "Nothing," in the lightest tone she could command.

"But why did you cry?" repeated Gilbert. "What was it all about? What was it for?"

"Nothing," replied Marcy again.

And with "nothing" Gilbert Holmes was obliged to be content, for just then came St. John's peculiar ring—that sharp imperative ring which every one in the house knew by now—and Marcy, running to the window, cried with quite childish glee, "Here is St. John Aylott, I declare! I am

so glad!" as if his coming was a rarity for which there was cause for special pleasure.

"I have come to propose a row down the river to-day," said St. John; "it is a delicious day for a lazy float as far as Fernwell. What do you say?" to Marcy.

"Charming!" cried Marcy, clapping her hands. "And I can steer."

"You will take an oar, Holmes?" said St. John in the tone of patronage he sometimes used to Gilbert.

"Willingly; we all go, I suppose?"

"I will make that tiresome Mr. Wyndham come," said Marcy. "He is writing now, some horrid stuff for the London papers, but I'll make him come."

"And Mrs. Aylott?—where are we to pick her up?" asked Gilbert.

"I do not suppose that Mrs. Aylott will join us," said St. John coldly.

"Indeed? is she ill?" Gilbert asked quite naturally, and therefore with interest.

"Not join us, St. John!" echoed Marcy. "Why? she is so fond of the river!"

"Oh! she cares for nothing now but that new toy of hers," St. John answered irritably. "She is no companion to me or to any one now—only a servant, only a mere nurse."

"Shall I drive over to the Hermitage and bring her, if she will come?" Gilbert asked. "I can be there and back before you have put on your bonnet, Marcy."

"I don't wear a bonnet, cousin Gilbert, I wear a hat," said Marcy.

"I am sure Mrs. Aylott is infinitely obliged to Mr. Holmes for his kind protection of her interests," said St. John ironically.

To which Gilbert answered with a laugh, "Protection of her interests! I should not have thought she needed that with you in existence; you must be a dreadful Bluebeard if she does."

St. John turned away. He had almost an Oriental's dislike to hear "his house" discussed. Had he had a little more force of character, he would have exercised an Oriental's command of silence. But though he had keen feelings and strong dislikes he had not much power, and had generally to content himself with showing

that he did not like a thing without being able to check another person's expression of it. As now. Nothing annoyed him more than to hear Isola spoken of by men; but he could not have told Gilbert to be silent to have saved his life.

Presently Harvey came dashing down, full of that strained importance consequent on "doing work" while others are idling.

"The post has not gone, Miss Tremouille?" he cried, bustling into the room noisily. "Ah, Aylott! I did not see you before. You see they cannot get on without me; and that unconscionable old governor actually wants me to write him two leaders a week while I am away; which I call mean of him—very."

Smith of the 'Comet' did no such thing; he had simply told Harvey he might write if he liked, and if he could he would use his work.

"Has the post gone out yet?" he asked of Marcy again.

"How could it have gone when it is only two o'clock—luncheon time—and it does not go out till four!" retorted Marcy impatiently.

"Ah, to be sure! but you see important things

like these make one anxious," said Harvey by way of apology.

"But they need not make you silly," was Marcy's cool comment. "Now Mr. Wyndham," she continued, "you are to come down the river with us to Fernwell. We are all going to row, and you are to come too."

"I shall not need much persuasion," said Harvey gallantly. "But where is Mrs. Aylott?" looking round the room.

"At home," said St. John stiffly.

"She is coming, don't be alarmed!" cried Marcy with pettish pleasantry. "Really, I have a great mind to be jealous of Isola," she pouted, turning to St. John: "if she were not such a darling I should be, for I am sure that both cousin Gilbert and Mr. Wyndham like her miles better than they like me. They are both half in love with her. And I think that a shame, seeing that she is married and I am not," with engaging candour and simplicity.

Harvey laughed and rubbed his hands, but Gilbert was evidently annoyed at his fair cousin's

speech; St. John was annoyed too, but with Isola only, in that it had been possible to speak of her at all, not with Marcy for speaking. A not uncommon piece of mental injustice when people are at odds together.

"But we have not settled about Mrs. Aylott yet," said Gilbert keeping to the point sturdily. "How is she to join us, unless some one drives over for her?"

"I will send the pony carriage and James can drive her back," said Marcy crossly. "You need not make such a fuss, cousin Gilbert! she is not going to be left behind."

"All right!" Gilbert answered; "so long as she comes, that is all."

"It is well I am not a jealous man," said St. John with a forced laugh. "Really, this excessive devotion to my wife is rather marked."

Gilbert laughed, more naturally than St. John had done. "You need not be jealous of me, at all events," he said; and Marcy looked at him steadily, with her eyebrows very much arched indeed.

If St. John had hoped that Isola would not join the party to-day, he was disappointed, for when the pony carriage and James drove up to the Hermitage, she looked and felt so lonely and deserted, sitting there in the garden alone (baby was asleep) that she was quite glad of the diversion, and ran upstairs to dress, with a brisk enjoyment in the prospect of a lazy row upon the river, that almost surprised herself. But there is a deal of human nature about men and women, says Sam Slick; and as it is human nature not to like to feel neglected, poor Isola was unfeignedly glad that she had been remembered.

But when she came to the Hall, where they were all assembled in the verandah waiting for her, she saw at a glance that her coming had annoyed her husband, and that he had wished to leave her behind. She could not turn back if she would; besides, though she was certainly a sweet-tempered woman as times go, she had a little salt with her sugar, and felt a natural flush of indignation at the idea that he had not wanted her to

join them, and a corresponding flush of perversity—"But I will go for all that."

So they set out to walk through the meadow to the river where the Hall boats lay moored, and St. John avoided his wife both by look and word, as if she had done something with which he was justly offended. Consequently Isola did not enter on the day's pleasure in a very satisfactory state of mind, and felt more inclined to cry than laugh as they sauntered through the fragrant grass and down to the clear waters of the winding stream. But Gilbert kept close by her side, and talked to her pleasantly; and what comfort a wife can get out of the kindness of a friend in return for the unkindness of her husband, she got from him now. A dry, husky form of comfort at the best; and if more than this—then dangerous, and falling under another category altogether. And for all that Isola in the unspoken depths of her soul respected Gilbert Holmes more than she respected her husband, yet the instinctive loyalty of a faithful wife made her long rather for one kind look

from him, than for many from her friend. She longed in vain to-day. She would not win them in the only way in which they could be won from such a man as St. John: and while the collision of will and conscience lasted the well of home happiness would be closed to her.

It was a silent party which floated down the river. Gilbert took the oars, but did not work very hard at them; the stream carried them in a lazy drifting way, with only an occasional pull to send them on a few feet farther than the current would have set them: and Marcy steered, and ran in among the bulrushes, and against the bank, and under the low-growing branches of the willows, and aground upon the sand-drift—not because she could not steer like a dart if she chose, but because the misadventure was an occasion for some pretty by-play and coquettish penitence, and made her for the moment the centre of attraction: in a way well known to certain women.

At length they dropped down to Fernwell; and here they all went ashore to see the view, and look for the rare wintergreen said to be

found among the rocks of the well. This was for Isola. She was fond of botany, and had a choice collection of wild flowers among the rock-work, and a beautiful bit of fern-garden by the side, and the rare wintergreen was naturally a coveted treasure, as all things are when rare. If the pyrola had been as common as daisies perhaps she would not have cared to take away a root from the rocks about Fernwell.

A curious little comedy went on about this botanizing. Marcy, who did not know a mushroom from a toadstool, nor a hawkweed from a dandelion, and whose love for wild flowers was in exact ratio with her knowledge, was suddenly smitten with quite a botanical fervour, and insisted on looking among the rocks for the pyrola with the rest. She had to be helped by the gentlemen a good deal; indeed she was strangely uncertain of her steps for so light and lissom a creature as she looked, and strangely timid for a girl brought up in the country as she had been. But then it was very pleasant to St. John to help her over her little diffi-

culties—Harvey putting in his oar whenever he could without absolute rudeness, for which neither Marcy nor St. John Aylott thanked him—while Isola wandered away alone, neither asking nor needing help; and Gilbert went away alone too, intent only on finding what his friend desired.

"How strong Isola is!" said Marcy as she leaned with pretty pantings and clinging terrors against St. John's shoulder. She was about thirty feet from the base of the rocks, and had climbed up by a smooth grassy slope with one or two rather large pebbles in the way, but she was dreadfully overcome with both fatigue and fear. Isola was high above them, on a very steep bit of the ravine that sloped towards the rivulet which fed the well below—where she had to do a real feat of clambering, holding on by jutting trees and great roots of bracken and trustworthy tufts of heather and bilberry, according to the needs of real clambering. "How I wish I was so strong!" she added.

"Do you?" said St. John gloomily. "I do not. I hate strong women."

"My goodness!" ejaculated Marcy. "Then why did you marry Isola? She is immensely strong—immensely!" she repeated with a marked emphasis. "As strong as some men indeed. She always puts me in mind of those things in Lempriere; what are they, St. John? I am such a little goosey! Those women who dressed like men, and went and fought?"

"Amazons," said St. John.

"Yes, Amazons," she repeated. "She always reminds me of one of them. She has such great arms; my goodness! what arms! and she takes such long strides when she walks. I take just two steps to her one. But of course it is better to be as she is, so strong and independent. We—girls like me I mean—want some one to take care of us, but the Amazons don't."

"It would be better for them if they did," said St. John bitterly.

Had Marcy searched through the whole catalogue of human offences she could not have found one that would have embittered St. John more against his wife than this accusation of

masculine strength. Perhaps she guessed as much when she spoke.

"Look at her!" cried Marcy. "What is she doing now? Why, St. John, she is actually going down the precipice! And it is so steep I believe! I have heard papa say that even men dare not go down. She will hurt herself I am sure. How imprudent of her—how foolish!"

"She must take her chance," St. John answered coldly.

At that moment he believed that he would not have cared had she broken her neck. But Isola had no intention of breaking her neck. She was, as Marcy said, both strong and independent—very fearless and very active—and she scrambled down the steep side of the ravine, and splashed ankle-deep into the water, and balanced herself on unsteady stones, and made quite acrobatic jumps from rock to rock, and disported herself in what St. John considered a frightfully unbecoming manner, but which to her was a delightful bit of childhood revived, and finally succeeded in spying out a root of the pyrola on the very

centre rock of all, which looked impracticable even to her. Then she sat down and waved her handkerchief to those below in a kind of anticipatory triumph.

And Marcy, leaning on St. John's shoulder and shuddering at her thirty feet of grassy ascent, returned the signal with very profuse demonstration, saying, "What a head she must have, St. John! My goodness! if I was up there I should faint!"

After this Isola, still rejoicing in her objectionable powers, managed to scale that impracticable-looking rock; and finally, after much effort and some little danger, she dug out the pyrola root, and then turned to descend from her fastness. But climbing up and scrambling down are different things, and oftentimes the latter is the more difficult of the two. And when she turned and looked down the ravine, and saw what was before her to accomplish, her courage a little failed her, and her head was not quite so steady as it should have been. In the excitement of her search she had got over every difficulty tri-

umphantly; but she did not feel so sure of herself now, and began to wish very heartily that she had not been so foolhardy, or that Gilbert Holmes was with her. She did not wish for her husband. He was no cragsman, and would have hindered rather than helped; and she did not wish for Harvey Wyndham, who would have made his chance the occasion for a great deal of unnecessary hand-squeezings and personal familiarities not to be resented because all done in the way of help and business; but she did wish for that tall square-cut grey-clad Californian gold-digger, who would have carried her safely down the worst passes of Mont Blanc, she verily believed, if need be.

It is not often that what we wish without apparent basis for our hope comes to pass; but this time it did; for presently Isola heard a cheery shout from above, and in a few moments Gilbert Holmes came swinging down the water-course, and sat down on the rock by her side. Her head steadied then, and her nerves quieted as by a kind of spell as she looked up into his

face with a pleasant smile, saying frankly, "I am so glad you have come, Mr. Holmes; I was getting almost frightened!"

"You need not be afraid," he said. "I can help you down easy enough."

"No, I am not afraid now," she answered simply, putting her hand in his as he helped her to jump the rock.

Her danger had been nothing very terrifying and her release from it involved nothing very heroic; but it was a little episode that helped to knit up the friendship already between them, for the sweetness of timely rescue on the one hand and of service rendered on the other; it was an episode in which the diluted action of many weeks seemed to have been concentrated; and when they reached the spot where Marcy and St. John still stood, it was to Isola, and to Gilbert too, as if they had lived months during that short descent of only a few minutes down th rocks.

Then they all entered the boat again, and Harvey and Gilbert rowed back, St. John steering

now because it was more important work than when they were merely dropping down with the current; and so at last they reached the Hall meadows again without accident of any kind.

They were only drifting—all alike drifting into unknown depths—it might be into unknown dangers, whence heaven alone knew what might be the issue. But it was a strange satire on the power of good how the false and the mean and the cruel were entangling the golden threads, which but for them would have woven themselves into wholesomeness and beauty—how innocence was becoming its own punishment, and truth was earning condemnation, while craft and falsehood took the guerdon of praise and love. How often that satire is repeated! How often our faith in the good of truth is tried, when our virtues are made the whips to scourge us, and the vices of others are the ladders by which they climb into the heaven of love and the esteem of their fellow-men! Surely no theological test of faith is so great as this; no promptings to speculative atheism so potent or so terrible!

CHAPTER V.

THE LIKENESS.

YET had it not been for Marcy's unlucky influence over St. John, and his estrangement, Isola would have been divinely happy in these later days. Were not her tenderest instincts fulfilled, and the circle of her affections complete? For to a woman who has never had a child of her own the adoption of a young infant gives the joy of actual motherhood, and satisfies the yearning which is part of her being. We can only judge of joy or grief according to our experience, and therefore we cannot measure the loss of the unknown; and for a motherless woman to hold a child in the loving authority of

a mother—to have for it the trouble, the care, the anxiety belonging to the functions of a mother—to watch the gradual development of power and character—to be in fact the mother in responsibility, is to be the mother in love; and if not to the entire gratification of the natural instincts, yet to the perfect gratification of the affections.

But in proportion to Isola's maternal happiness was her wifely sorrow. If St. John could not forgive that direct opposition to his will, neither could he tolerate that she should find joy in this new love. A child was a rival. Had it been his own child it would still have been a rival; but being what it was—a creature that reminded him of the most shameful facts of his family history—a creature too, forced upon him against his wish, and in the presence of witnesses to his discomfiture, it was his enemy; and Isola's life was made hard to her in consequence.

The very demon of perversity seemed to have possessed St. John. If she went into the nursery he was sure to send for her on some urgent

plea admitting of no delay; if the child was brought to her where he was, or if he met her with it in the house or garden, he would rush away as if he had met the plague, generally going off to Marcy, with whom he would stay for the remainder of the day. All her pretty womanish ways with it angered him almost to madness, and the very motherliness that would have seemed so beautiful to an instinctive man—that did seem so beautiful to Gilbert Holmes—was sensuality and degradation to St. John Aylott. He used often to say that the maternal instinct was the most animalistic of all human instincts, and that mothers with their babies were only cows with a difference; and when it came to love for a child not her own, he said, a woman who could love and adopt a strange infant was just an animal and no more, without even the excuse of natural instinct.

Isola scarcely knew how to act in the coil into which she had got; whether with that supple tact which removes the cause of annoyance for fear of further aggravation, or with the

steady maintenance of a principle let who would be offended. She did a little of both, as most women would have done; being careful not to unnecessarily exasperate her husband by any very open demonstrations, but still holding to the child she had taken and loved like her own.

"A mere beggar's brat!" St. John used to say contemptuously; and "wait till Richard Norton is able to attend to business again, and then we shall see who was right and who was wrong in the absurd farce that has been played at my expense!"

Sometimes he would take another tone, that half-pettish half-loving tone, that mixture of love and selfishness which is so hard for a woman to withstand.

"Oh! you do not care for me now, Isola!" he said one day when she had voluntarily done him some pretty little service. "Since that wretched little animal has been here you have been quite changed to me, and I do not think you care for me so much as you do for Marcy Tremouille's lory. I am sure you do not care for me half so

much as for those two men there, Wyndham and Holmes!"

"You wicked creature!" said Isola, glad to have even this questionable piece of pleasantry with him.

He was sitting on the sofa, a sullen kind of relenting on his face.

Afraid of himself with Marcy he wanted to "make up" with Isola, but did not know how to begin. He was too proud to say that he had been in the wrong, and he was not sure of the submission from her which must be the basis of a better understanding.

"How can you say such a thing!" she continued, looking into his face tenderly. "So far as not caring goes, I think it is you who care for some one more than for me, not I who have deserted you!"

"What do you mean?" asked St. John stiffly.

"Marcy," answered Isola more directly than grammatically. "If I had been a jealous woman I should have been jealous of her long ago!" She spoke pleasantly, but she flushed as she

spoke, and lowered her eyes to conceal the expression that came into them.

"You do not care enough for me to be jealous of me," returned St. John. "You need not plume yourself on your freedom from a fault to which you have no temptation, Isola. Indifference is not want of jealousy, and coldness is not a virtue."

"But I am neither cold nor indifferent, and I will not let you talk such nonsense!" she answered, laying her hand somewhat timidly on his shoulder—caresses never having been very frequent between them, and of late entirely abolished. "What has put it into your head that I am changed, St. John?" she then asked, her flexible voice deepening as she spoke.

"What? everything!" was his not very indicative reply.

She sat down by him, and her hand slid from his shoulder to his hand resting on his knee. "Tell me of one thing only," she said very earnestly. "What have I done to make you think me changed to you? Tell me and I will repent, if I know how or of what!"

"I would do anything in the world to please you," she said fervently.

"Anything, Isola?" with a peculiar emphasis.

"Except"—she stopped.

"I was sure of the except," said St. John bitterly. "Except the exact thing I want you to do."

"No, no! everything but give up a principle," she exclaimed.

"You mean selfishness," he retorted coldly.

"I am not selfish, St. John," she pleaded.

"You are, Isola!—intensely selfish!—only you call it by another name. You give me up for a new toy, and because you prefer the toy you call that principle! You are selfish, and you are self-deceiving too."

"You know that I would sacrifice myself at all times for your happiness, St. John," she said still in the same pleading way. "If I hold to one thing against your will, it is because I think it right to do so. I do not say that I am right; I only think that I am; and it seems to me it would be even less respectful to you to give way

to you, just to keep you in good humour, than to trust to your sense of justice as I do, and keep my own conscience clear."

"Your own conscience clear!" he repeated impatiently. "What better conscience can any woman have than to obey her husband! That is your first duty and your best; do that, Isola, and your conscience will be clear enough!"

"But if I cannot feel that, St. John?"

"Then your mind is in a very ill-regulated condition, and the sooner you come to know this and repent of your sin the better," her husband answered in his grandfather's manner.

"But I do pray so earnestly for guidance," said Isola in a low voice. "Oh, St. John, if you knew how I long to be taught the truth and the right!"

As she spoke she flung herself across his breast, tears stealing down her face. For a moment the young man's better nature triumphed. He stooped forward and kissed the flushed and noble face lying against his narrow chest.

"You mean to be a good child," he said ap-

always said, is so dreadfully clever she could not look up to you or to any one as I do. I am only a little child, born to obey and respect; but Isola is quite different. I am only a cipher."

"Women ought to be only ciphers," said St. John—"ciphers that men alone give value to, worthless by themselves, but when properly headed of inestimable value."

"Oh!" said Isola deprecatingly.

Her accent of dissent was unlucky. St. John Aylott did not often speak in tropes, and when he did he was immensely pleased with himself and thought himself an intellectual giant ready-made.

"Of course I think you are right," said pretty Marcy raising her soft eyes sweetly. "And so cleverly said too! I should not mind being a cipher myself, for I am such a stupid thing I am worth nothing else. Besides, I should like to owe all to my husband, if ever I was married. But I can fancy a clever strong-minded woman like Isola wanting to be her own mistress and independent of her husband. It is only natural."

"But I do not want to be my own mistress or independent of my husband," said Isola hurriedly.

"My dear child," remonstrated St. John in quite a grand manner, "how you blind yourself! I know no one more impatient of control than yourself—no one more arbitrary. You will not even take advice, still less submit to authority."

"But it is so natural!" said Marcy in a tender tone of apology. "She is such a great clever thing! Cousin Gilbert says she is the cleverest woman he knows and the strongest-minded. Now I am such a dreadful little creature I could not be my own mistress if I tried; and so I should be quite lost if I was left to myself without any one to direct or guide me."

"So you are always saying," said Isola steadily, "and yet you are absolute in your own home, Marcy, and do just as you like in all things. Mr. Tremouille never opposes you, and you are ten times more your own mistress than I am, or than any one I know."

"That is because Miss Tremouille is a true

woman, and knows that she conquers by yielding," said St. John hastily. "If all women knew that, things would go far better for every one. It is your obstinate self-willed women who fight for their own way that never get it. The real mistress is the most submissive wife."

"Well, I would rather not have my own way if I had to get it by pretended submission," said Isola warmly. "I do not like that kind of thing at all. Far better to be honest and straightforward, and to say out boldly what one wishes, than to succeed by pretending an obedience which is in reality only manœuvring."

"Don't be vexed with me, dear," said Marcy tenderly. "I did not mean to offend you—indeed I did not!"

"You did not offend me," Isola answered laughing a little hysterically. "Was I so very vehement, then?"

"Rather," said pretty Marcy sorrowfully.

"Not vehement—rude, Isola," was St. John's grave rebuke.

"Oh, don't scold her!" cried Marcy; "she

did not mean it." Then, as if to turn the conversation out of a dangerous channel, she cried suddenly, "May I see the baby, dear Isola? I am dying to see the little darling again! I am so fond of babies, and I quite envy you your little nephew. Why he must be like your own child, Isola, is he not?"

"Yes," said Isola in a low voice; "I love him as if he was my own."

"Do you like babies?" asked Marcy of St. John.

"No, I hate the little brutes," was his savage answer as Isola rang the bell twice—that universal nursery signal.

"Oh, don't have him down then, if St. John—if Mr. Aylott, I mean—does not like it!" said Marcy. "Let us go to the nursery instead. Don't have it down."

"I am sure my husband would wish me to do what I think right," said Isola steadily. She was a little vexed—more than a little, and did not care to be conciliating before Marcy.

"Oh, Isola, how I wish I was as strong-minded

as you!" cried the girl. "What a comfort to be able to say yes or no as one likes, and not be such a little coward as I am, afraid of wounding every one! How I wish I was like you!"

"Don't get corrupted, Miss Tremouille," said St. John harshly. "Those are not your own sentiments, and they are dangerous. Evil communications—"

"Will she corrupt me?" asked Marcy in her gentlest tones. "Dear Isola! I think I will brave the danger. Fancy Isola Aylott corrupting any one!" she added with her arm round Isola's waist and her head bent lovingly against her shoulder. Nothing could be more simple, naïve, affectionate than her whole attitude and manner, but Isola knew that she had done her more harm than usual to-day.

Then the baby was brought down, and Isola's discomfort vanished. As she took him in her arms it was if she held the whole world of human happiness. Life had nothing more to give her, and sorrow could not touch her, while that little face smiled up into hers, and the dimpled fingers

wandered aimlessly about her cheeks and throat. She was the mother now, not the wife; and for the moment her husband's open estrangement and her friend's secret treachery were alike forgotten, while she raised the baby to her face, and pressed her lips against that wet wide-opened mouth whose kisses were dearer than royal decorations.

"Does he not look well?" she said to Marcy with admiring pride.

"Very well indeed—beautiful! what a pity he is not your own!" said Marcy.

"Oh! he is my own—my very own!" crooned Isola; "he is my own boy and his mam's his own mother!" This she said to the baby, not to her companion; and then she went off into some of the sublime nonsense of a loving mother, in the midst of which St. John left the room in disgust, and Marcy followed him to "make him good again," as she said.

These were Isola's absurdities—faults if you will—which she had not power to overcome, because of the force of instinct in her, and which

St. John had not magnanimity to allow, nor depth of philosophy to understand.

Soon after this Isola one day went out to walk with the baby and the nurse. St. John was at the Hall as usual. Things had been going badly between the young people since the last failure in the attempt to mend them; and whether to punish Isola for her disobedience, or because he was getting really entangled in his feelings for Marcy, his devotion to her increased daily, and with it his coldness and displeasure to his wife. Isola did not see much of the Hall people. Marcy came very seldom to the Hermitage, and she went over to her even seldomer; sometimes Gilbert Holmes would call, but not often, though when he did come he left Isola with a feeling of strength and healing no one else gave her. But this was merely a chance pleasure: in the daily run of her life she had but the baby—and the more she was left to this new affection the more absorbing it became. Her very soul clave to the child which was not hers, and which she did not love because of its Aylott blood—which she loved

because of free maternal instinct; and soon it grew to be the largest part of her life, and the only part that satisfied her. She loved it as if it had been her own—need mothers ask for more?—with a trembling tenderness, a passionate delight, a yearning hope—with the fear inseparable from love always in the background, an adoption of life constituting maternity. And perhaps unfortunately, as the world reckons duties, her love for the child that was not hers made up to her for the loss of her married happiness, and deadened her regret for the love which was fast dying out for her husband. But Isola was only a woman, and by no means perfect in the more difficult parts of moral arithmetic. So long as the rules were simple she could understand and follow them; but when they came to be compound and contradictory she got puzzled, as we all do, and felt her way through the maze as well as she could, if not always with success. And after all, was it wrong that she should so love her adopted child? Is instinct so far superior to affection that what is wholesome and holy be-

cause instinctive becomes diseased and sinful when merely loving?

Isola did not feel it to be so when she nursed her little son, as she called him, and played with him by the hour together—putting him to sleep, attending to his food, embroidering cloaks and frocks, and going out with him and nurse all the same as if he had been her own; and in her dear love for him trying to forget that her husband was unkind, and that she was practically deserted for pretty Marcy of the Hall.

One day she and the nurse went to walk in the lane that led to Buckhurst Ground, and in time came to the triad of cottages there, to find old Aaron seated as usual at the door, warming his chilly blood in the sun. As she passed she went up to him, and showed him the baby—showing it with all the pride and love of a real mother, and forgetting as she always did that she was only an aunt by marriage.

"Aye! it's a fine child," he said giving his shrivelled finger for the little pulpy hand to clasp. "It's a pity as it ain't your own, ma'am."

"I love it just as well," said Isola.

"Yes! yes! I don't doubt! All children's much of a muchness to a woman. There's a deal of what one sees in the fields about a woman. If a ewe loses her lamb another 'll do as well—and so it is with women. But it's when they get up a bit that the differ shows."

"But this little fellow will never know another mother, and he will grow up thinking me his mother, and loving me like a son," said Isola.

"Nay! it's not that, ma'am—it's not the want of love, but the ways as tell when young uns gets up. It's the blood, and not all the schooling in England 'll get it out. You'll maybe know the saying as I've heard was made by a scholard, 'What's bred in the bone will out in the flesh'? Do what you will, blood will out."

"Well! he is my husband's nephew," said Isola laughing.

"That don't make it your own, ma'am, do what you will. What you like he won't take to when he gets up. I've seen it in my own. My wife came from Cadiz—that's in Spain you know, ma'am—

and that poor Honor of mine and this here Nancy as is only her granddaughter, is both as like her as they can stare, and not English in their ways at all. That's what goes against stepmothers and adopted orphans. Else it's all very well while they are small and you can have your will of them, but when they get up then the differ shows."

Isola smiled, and looked at the baby lovingly. She was proof against old Aaron's philosophy, and believed that love would conquer all things.

"It's only a graft at best," said Aaron after a time. "And if you graft a white-heart on a morel the white-heart stays what it was, and don't change for all the tie."

While she was standing there bending over the child and still smiling cheerfully, St. John and Mr. Tremouille, with Marcy between them, passed; and seeing her stopped and turned.

"Ah, Mrs. Aylott!" said Mr. Tremouille in his pleasant voice, coming up to Isola and offering his hand. "Glad to see you again. Why you are quite a stranger since you had your baby. Well, Aaron, and how are you to-day?"

"Kindly, sir, thank you," said the old man.

"Oh! we'll make a man of you yet," said Mr. Tremouille laughing.

"More like a corp," said Aaron quite in a manner of fact way.

"Well, Mrs. Aylott! and so this is our nephew, is it? By Jove, he grows apace!—a fine little fellow, and does you credit, ma'am."

"Is he not improving wonderfully?" she asked smiling.

"Gad! he's an honour to his keep!" Mr. Tremouille answered. "Why St. John, my boy, he's enough to make you jealous!"

Isola took the child in her arms, and turned with a pretty trouble to her husband. She so longed for him to say a kind word of her treasure—but St. John, affecting to be just then engaged with brushing off some dust from his coat sleeves, did not see her.

Marcy stole up to him with her soft gliding step, and, touching his arm, said gently, "Give me that flower in your hat, St. John. I want it for dear Isola."

It was a spray of woodbine, which, because it had hung over a deep ditch and up a steep bank, Marcy had vehemently desired; and of course St. John had risked what would have been very painful to him—a humiliating tumble into the mire—for the sake of giving her pleasure. He took off his hat to unfasten the spray which he had twined round to keep it fresh, and the sunlight fell on his dark, thin, handsome, Spanish face. It was the first time old Aaron had really seen him; and as he looked he started and trembled violently, his eyes taking a wild and eager expression almost painful in intensity.

"Why Aaron! what are you looking at? a ghost?" cried Mr. Tremouille.

They all turned to the old man as he sat with open lips and fixed eyes turned half in fear on St. John Aylott, and Nancy came to the door and touched his shoulder.

"Grandfather!" she said, "what ails you, grandfather?"

He shuddered and sighed.

"Nothing! nothing! But he minded me so

of my poor Honor!" he said to Mr. Tremouille. "He looked so like her as he stood there he might ha' been her fetch!"

"Gad! so he does!" cried Mr. Tremouille. "I see now who he is like, and I never understood it before. And he is like Nancy too. Why they are as like as brother and sister!"

St. John turned away haughtily.

"My star is in the ascendant," he said with an unpleasant smile.

"Might be worse!" was Mr. Tremouille's cheery answer; "and might be better, St. John," in a lower voice.

CHAPTER VI.

FAMILY HISTORIES.

"Dear Aylott,—I am all right again now, and attending to business after an unpleasant little recess. Expect me at Newfield to-morrow by the midday train, as I have matters of importance to communicate to you.—Yours very sincerely, Richard Norton."

This was the note which St. John found waiting for him on his return from Buckhurst Ground and old Aaron's strange scrutiny; and as he was in a bad humour to-day because he had been looked at, and highly disgusted to be supposed like a peasant's daughter, he was not prepared to receive either this or anything else with amenity.

"He has taken his time about writing to me," he said irritably. "I have written to him twice before he has had the civility to reply."

"He seems to have been very ill," said Isola.

She liked Mr. Norton; he had always been kind to her, and in their luxurious solitude the grave dry elderly lawyer had been a pleasant if not very frequent break.

"Oh, people are never so ill as they make themselves out to be!" St. John answered disdainfully. "A cold or a headache is excuse enough for some men to parade themselves as dangerously ill, that they may get the sympathy of a few silly women—women like you, Isola."

This harsh manner of speech was getting habitual with St. John Aylott. Never genial, and now soured as well as cold, it seemed impossible for him to speak pleasantly about anything to her, the main cause of his discomfort everywhere, and consequently investing every subject that came between them with the angry annoyance he felt towards herself. For he was one of those whose personal feelings colour every

circumstance of life, and who cannot separate people from things. Because he was vexed with Isola, he was unfriendly to all with which she was concerned, however remotely; and as Richard Norton had had some relation with this worry about the child, he had also fallen under displeasure—"as he would find to his cost before their interview was many minutes old," he said lifting his lip in pleased anticipation of the spirit he was going to show his ancient friend and family adviser.

But when the lawyer came down, even St. John was obliged to confess that he must have been frightfully ill to be so strangely altered as he was; and resolved to let him off easy, and to reserve his spirit for a future occasion, when they might meet more as equals than now. It was a commendable impulse of compassion, but Richard Norton did not seem to desire his compassion somehow; on the contrary, there was a hardness about his face and manner very unlike the usual bland deference which made him so pleasant a master and so safe a friend; and so

far from asking grace by reason of his own weakness, he seemed disposed to offer none. To Isola, however, he was even kinder than usual, as if to mark more distinctly that it was only with her husband with whom his displeasure lay; only him whom he had to punish for his unfeeling repudiation of his sister, when, broken-hearted and dying, she had prayed for one short moment of reconciliation between them. Richard Norton knew what he had come to do to-day, but his heart never failed him for a moment. All the inherited love and care of years, all the old friendship and connexion between himself and Mark Aylott were forgotten, and he saw himself only as Harriet's avenger, and the destined instrument for the chastisement of her offender. He scarcely knew till now how much he had loved her.

"You guess the object of my visit?" he said to the young man, as soon as the first greetings were over.

"I do not know what you have to say to me, I only know what I have to say to you," answered St. John coldly.

"Doubtless on the same question, and it may be some others in addition, unexpected by you." Mr. Norton spoke with the half threatening accent of a man full of a mysterious power; that accent which awes a listener far more than anything definite.

"Let us go into the library; I would rather discuss these matters alone," said St. John glancing at Isola.

"Pardon me—Mrs. Aylott must hear what I have to say. It concerns her as much as you," was Mr. Norton's answer, given with peculiar emphasis.

"But if you would rather not, St. John?" said Isola, always glad to make small submissions as a kind of compensation for her disobedience in large things.

"Oblige me by taking a chair, Mrs. Aylott," said Mr. Norton; "I wish you to be here. You will else give me the trouble of a second explanation, and my time is limited."

"Business is not for women," began St. John.

"I quite agree with you. Business details

are certainly not for them—but family histories come under another category. Mrs. Aylott has to hear what I have to say—she had better hear it now with you."

Something in the lawyer's manner overbore St. John. Sullenly flinging himself into a chair, he said to his wife, still standing irresolute, "You may stay, Isola, as Mr. Norton so much wishes it," in a lordly manner of permission which made the lawyer smile.

"So you have adopted your sister's son, I hear?" he began, when they were all seated in a triangle facing the window.

"No, Mrs. Aylott has taken up with a swindler's child—a beggar's brat—palmed off on her by her precious cousin," answered St. John harshly.

"Oh! Mrs. Aylott has taken up with a swindler's child palmed off on her, has she?" repeated Richard Norton quietly, but with something in his eyes by no means so quiet as his manner. "I think you will have to reconsider that expression, St. John Aylott."

"I do not think I shall," he answered sullenly.

"No? not when I tell you that the child in question is the real child of your sister Harriet?"

"Those things are easily said for a purpose, Mr. Norton," disdainfully. "What proof have I?"

"My oath."

"I do not doubt your word of course," said St. John, glancing up with his furtive look; "but in an important matter like this, one wants more than the oath of one man."

"I have abundance of written proof besides," said the lawyer quite quietly. "If my oath cannot convince you, I have enough evidence independent of it to show you that the Mrs. Grant who died two months ago at Mrs. Osborn's, in Seymour Street—the mother of the child now in your care—was your sister Harriet, the only daughter of your father Mark Aylott, as she represented herself to you in her letter. You see I know all about that, and about your answer too. I saw her in her illness; I was

with her when she died; I had never lost sight of her from the day of her fatal elopement and still more fatal marriage, to the day of her death; when she was in California with her husband, I corresponded with her regularly; and when she came, a widow, to London, I took charge of her and provided her with what she needed. She had been discarded by her family, but I, the family lawyer, never discarded her; and when she was dead to all of you, she was living, cared for, and protected by me." He spoke with passionate warmth, and he forgot at the moment of his taunt that it was he himself who had made her dead to her family, and put up the tombstone as a barrier against after-recognition. Perhaps he knew as well as St. John that they never believed his report, and only cared to hope that it might be true.

"I was sure that Jane was right!" murmured Isola to herself, but in so low a voice that neither heard her.

St. John was silent. It is uphill work to fight the family solicitor when he asserts facts

hitherto concealed from ourselves, and yet St. John felt that it would not do to give in without a struggle. If he gave Richard Norton his head at first, where would it all lead to?

"I shall require stringent proofs of what you advance, Mr. Norton," he said after a pause, knowing nothing better to say. "It is a strange story and very suddenly put forth, and must be confirmed before it can be believed. You said she was dead," he added, suddenly flaming up. "Who but yourself ever knew or spoke about her? How can you reconcile your two statements?"

"She is not the first person I have made dead to her family," the lawyer answered with strange significance. "Your father was no longer in existence to forgive and help her, and I did not choose—I did not choose, St. John—that you should have the power to crush her still more lamentably than she was crushed already. I made her dead that I might protect her better; but my scheme failed!" He sighed as he said this, and his face took a worn and weary look upon

it. "However," he continued, "you are in the right to demand proofs, St. John. I should do the same in your position; and here they are," opening a packet of letters docketed and tied up with red tape. "These, I think, will convince you," he said, selecting a few from among them, and showing a photograph with the rest. "Changed as she was since you last saw her," here a slight tremor came into his voice, "this is still the portrait of Harriet Aylott; and this was the Mrs. Grant who died three months ago."

St. John took the photograph and looked at it silently.

"You acknowledge it?" said Richard Norton.

"Photographs are too vague to be accepted as evidence," he replied. "This has a certain look of Harriet I admit, but I would not swear to it. It may be the photograph of some one resembling her in general appearance. I cannot accept it as proof," laying it on the table with a self-satisfied magisterial air that provoked Richard Norton more than all the rest.

"Combined with those letters in your hand it is testimony enough," said the lawyer. "Come! come! Aylott! these objections are puerile. What interest can I have in making up a falsehood about a poor dead woman? What concern can it be of mine? If this Mrs. Grant was not your sister, why should I interfere for the child?"

"How do I know why?" said St. John with a dark look. "Men sometimes do strange things without explaining their motives. How should I know that you have no personal interest in this boy?"

"That is simply absurd, as well as unnecessarily insulting," Mr. Norton answered, "but let that pass. Let me recapitulate my statement. The Mrs. Grant who wrote to you three months ago from Seymour Street, praying for an interview and for forgiveness on her deathbed, which interview you refused"—this was said almost directly to Isola, as if determined to make her see her husband in the most unlovely light—"that Mrs. Grant who, I say, died of misery and a broken heart at the house of Mrs.

Osborn, your wife's aunt, was your sister, Harriet Aylott, the wife of James Grant, who was formerly a travelling circus-rider in Mason's company. The child, Reginald Aylott Grant, brought down to you by Miss Osborn, is her legitimate child —for they were legally married in after years— consequently he is your nephew; and as such you will doubtless provide for him out of the fortune left you by your father? If you refuse to do so, I will take him myself and bring him up as my own son. But it would not be a creditable thing to be said of you, for you can understand the reasons which would make me tell the story everywhere; and when certain circumstances yet in the background were added, the thing would look ugly enough."

"I am not to be threatened!" said St. John angrily.

"My good boy, I do not threaten you," Mr. Norton answered superciliously. "I only tell you that you must accept one of the two conditions, and you may accept the one which pleases you best. Either openly adopt the boy as your

nephew, making such provision for him as I shall hereafter indicate, or leave him to me, with the knowledge that your refusal will be told everywhere, and the whole family history of the Aylotts made public. It will be a pleasure to me to adopt the boy," he continued joining his fingers at the tips and looking at them as if he had never seen them before, "because of the regard I had for your father—and your sister," after a slight pause; "but it will be a lasting disgrace to you: which however is your affair, not mine."

"I have taken the child," said Isola hurriedly. "I will not give him up."

"Thank you," said Richard Norton holding out his hand to her.

Her words gave St. John an opportunity. "Silence, Isola!" he cried angrily. "You are here on sufferance only, remember. How dare you interfere in a matter that does not concern you!"

"Pardon me, but it does concern her," said Mr. Norton steadily, "and she has the right to a voice in the decision. If she on whom all the

trouble and anxiety and personal care of the first years will devolve may not speak, who may?" Then he asked again after a few moments of silence, "Your decision, Aylott? Am I to bring up the grandson of Mark Aylott, or will you?"

"It is a most painful position—a most annoying and disgraceful circumstance altogether!" said St. John, walking to the window where he stood looking vaguely forward, but seeing nothing that he looked at—conscious only of that angry passion of the haughty man in the toil of circumstances and unable to free or even to revenge himself. His most definite feeling was anger against Isola. Yes, Isola was the one chiefly to blame. She had brought all this upon him. From first to last it had been her doing; and his disgrace and sorrow were her work. Had she done as he wished, and refused to see that wretched aunt of hers, all the miserable chain of circumstances which had hung upon that one fatal beginning would never have been. His enemy—always his enemy—and why? What had he done? Good God! how had he deserved it?

He had loved her as few men love their wives—he had lived only for her—had had no pleasure but with her—he had not neglected her as other men neglect even wives more beautiful than she—he had not indulged in any vice, not even in a luxury that she could not share—she had been his idol, his adored, his delight; and her reward had been—his ruin!

Working himself into a frenzy with such thoughts, all wide of truth and wide of the matter at issue, St. John still stood by the window muttering to himself, when Richard Norton touched his arm and asked again, this time even more authoritatively; "Your decision, Aylott? Which course do you elect to take?"

"St. John! you will not let the child go!" pleaded Isola. "Not only for his sake, but for your own."

"For my own!" he said with a harsh laugh. "Much you care for me in the matter, Isola! You mean for your own sake—for your passing pleasure in a new plaything—a mere live doll that you dress and undress as you used to do with

your wax ones, and then fancy yourself a mother! I wonder how long the farce will last!"

"Tell me when Mrs. Aylott fails in her motherly care of your nephew and I will take up what she drops. I will take it now if you like, St. John, and you will never be troubled again, nor asked for a penny while I live."

"I do not choose that my father's grandson should be brought up on charity," said St. John fiercely, turning round and facing Mr. Norton.

"Good," was that gentleman's quiet reply. "What I expected from you, Aylott. That question then is settled—you keep your poor sister's son—the only one of your blood in the next generation as yet?" He paused: St. John made no reply. "I may take this for granted, and that he will be brought up as your son should be brought up?"

Isola gently laid her hand on her husband's shoulder. Her face was pale and her dark eyes full of tears. Was she then to have that little one by confessed permission, and no longer in mute defiance? Was he to be perhaps a link

and not a cause of severance between her and her husband, bringing them nearer in one common love, one holy duty? His sister's child—an Aylott in blood if not in name—would not St. John love her for the care of him? Would he not be glad that she was the willing mother of the only child yet born of his family? "Will you not?" she whispered, her words spoken from her thoughts rather than alluding to Mr. Norton's question.

"Did I not order you not to interfere, Isola?" said St. John harshly, dashing away her hand with fierce rudeness. "This is a matter of business between Mr. Norton and myself, and if you have been admitted to the discussion, it is not that you may interrupt us. Learn your place," he added angrily turning away. It soothed him, writhing in Richard Norton's bonds, to be able to speak to his wife as to a slave.

Isola changed colour, and the tears that had gathered beneath her lashes for love and yearning were scorched and dried away. Mr. Norton turned a step or two aside, humming a few uncertain bars of 'Figaro' between his closed lips,

and then St. John in a harsh and hollow voice said slowly, "I yield to the necessities of my position, Mr. Norton. If the boy is my sister's and, as you say, legitimate, I keep it. I will not have it said that an Aylott, however unworthy, left a child to charity."

Richard Norton made a cold inclination of his head. "You have decided wisely," he said; and St. John, who had expected an enthusiastic recognition of his magnanimity, felt disappointed and aggrieved.

"Now I want something more," said Richard Norton, clearing his throat and crossing his legs, still keeping his finger tips pressed close together, as he rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. "I want you to give me an undertaking to leave a certain sum of money to this boy—in fact to make him your heir, failing children of your own, and to leave him a share if you have children of your own—to make him then equal with the rest."

"Anything more?" said St. John Aylott calmly as to manner, whatever the hidden fire.

"No, nothing," replied Richard Norton.

"I refuse your request," said the young man in the same unnaturally calm voice. "You are travelling beyond your last, Mr. Norton. The disposition of my property may at least be left to myself!" smiling ironically.

"I think not," said Richard Norton. "Under the peculiar circumstances of the case, I think I must somewhat insist on the adoption of my views. By strict legal right, this boy should now be in possession of your father's property; for by strict legal right that property should have gone to your sister, and not to you. Let me elucidate my position. A sum of five hundred pounds has been left to Honor Wilson or her heirs by one Massinger—Dalton Massinger, an artist—lately deceased. By the way," looking up quite tranquilly, as if the subject on hand was a mere nothing, involving no disclosures and no distress, "Massinger was the brother-in-law, through his first wife, of Mr. Tremouille here—your neighbour; and uncle to Gilbert Holmes, who I understand is now at the Hall. The Holmes family

owned this place twenty years ago. Perhaps you are aware of that fact?"

"Yes," said St. John sullenly.

"He is the residuary legatee under Massinger's will; and he and Mr. Tremouille are executors, with Harvey Wyndham," said Mr. Norton monotonously.

"Well?" said St. John after a short silence, "and how does that affect me?"

"Honor Wilson was the daughter of an old gardener here, one Aaron Wilson, living now at Buckhurst Ground," continued Mr. Norton in the same dry monotonous voice as before.

Again there was a short silence.

"I do not follow you," then said St. John. "What is it to me? what interest can I have in a legacy left to a peasant's daughter? Am I to be mixed up in their concerns as well as in—" He stopped himself in time.

"Whose?" asked the lawyer coldly.

"No matter whose!" was the sullen answer.

"You have to be mixed up in this matter of the legacy," then said Mr. Norton; "there being

a closer connexion between you and old Aaron Wilson than you perhaps suspect."

"Between me and Aaron Wilson!" cried St. John angrily. "Where is this pleasantry to stop, Mr. Norton?"

"I am sorry to be obliged to tell you a family secret that will be painful for you to hear," said Mr. Norton coldly; "but Honor Wilson the gardener's daughter was your father's wife, and the mother of yourself and your sister."

St. John burst into a loud laugh. "Honor Wilson the gardener's daughter my mother!" he cried; "my mother, Harriet Fitzwilliam! What next, Mr. Norton? Go on—pray go on—the joke is growing!"

"Your mother's name was not Harriet Fitzwilliam, it was Honor Wilson," repeated Mr. Norton in his hardest voice. "We called her Harriet Fitzwilliam to prevent inquiry and baffle pursuit. We made her dead to her father, just as twenty-two years later I made her daughter dead to you St. John; and sent him the child she then had—Massinger's child, the Nancy

Wilson you know of, I daresay. Honor Wilson was Massinger's model, and deserted him for Mark Aylott, who was infatuated with her. He married her after your birth, and when she died —she died mad," he added coldly—"he went into the church. Thus you see Harriet Grant, your sister, was the only one legitimate of the two children; and that is why I say you must make your will in favour of her son, since the law would have recognized her and not you, but for your father's express will."

"It is false! it is a lie from end to end!" shouted St. John; and then he fell to the floor like a stone, struck down in a fit of epilepsy.

But he was not doomed to die yet. The fit shook him severely and he came out of it an altered man, and for the time a shattered one, but he did not die; neither did he lose his reason—as at one time seemed more than probable. He recovered and went through life much as usual, with only the finer cords jarring and out of tune and the keener edges jagged. He showed his state most at home, as was natural;

keeping for the most part a gloomy silence that nothing could break, and affecting profound concealment of his affairs, in the ostentatious fear that Isola would make a bad use of her knowledge, should she be associated with anything belonging to him, and so would bring disgrace and trouble on him again. But he was not often at home now in any humour, good or bad, being more than ever at the Hall, where Marcy soothed him by her flattery and Harvey Wyndham held him by his talk.

But all that talk was about shares and profitable investments; a subject hitherto utterly out of St. John Aylott's sphere, whose fortune was just as his father had left it and as Richard Norton had advised. Now however he studied the share market eagerly, and listened to Harvey Wyndham as a neophyte to a master; resolving within himself to execute the worst piece of revenge that presented itself to him, namely, to take his affairs out of Richard Norton's hands and manage them himself—Harvey Wyndham helping. In the meantime Richard Norton sent

for Gilbert Holmes and told him the whole Aylott history from first to last. The story was safe with Gilbert who was not fond of family histories, and neither Isola nor St. John knew of his participation in the secret. Besides, he and Harvey Wyndham had both guessed and surmised something at least of, if not all the truth.

CHAPTER VII.

HERN POOL.

It came to be time for Harvey Wyndham to leave. His holiday was over because his purse was empty, and he must go back to the Great Babylon to replenish it, if he would not be stranded at Newfield Hall. Besides, his work was wanting him. Jane Osborn had done well and kindly for him, but lotus-eating would not do for ever, with even Marcy Tremouille as a possibility by no means made probable. Indeed he had begun to think his chance less vigorous than he had thought it in the first days. Marcy had evidently not learnt to love him better as time went on. She had flirted and coquetted

with him when he first went down, because she was Marcy and must coquet with some one, but she had of late palpably snubbed the bright-eyed handy-man of literature for St. John and Gilbert Holmes alike. And if Harvey Wyndham was not wanting in that self-love which makes most men believe themselves irresistible to all women, neither was he wanting in clearness of perception and common sense; besides, having a constitutional horror of a fool's paradise—preferring to know the worst than to dream the best. Still, he by no means gave up the game for lost, but went back to the mill as he said, with a tolerably contented mind, and balanced his gains and his losses with philosophic impartiality.

His greatest gain was his friendship with St. John Aylott, which of late had become quite an intimacy. St. John had confided to him his displeasure with Richard Norton; not touching upon causes be very sure; and had further consulted with him about certain shares and investments whereof Harvey gave himself out as a proficient judge, and wherein he said he

was a successful speculator. He had nearly obtained his consent to be put in the way of one or two good things, but though St. John hung back, and refused to take action just at present, yet Harvey knew that it would come sooner or later, and that the hook had struck though the fish might not be landed. And this would be a good thing for him, knowing as he did how the manipulation of another man's money gives a power second only to the manipulation of one's own.

Meanwhile St. John lent him a couple of hundreds, which set him straight for the present, and enabled him to steer safely through what else would have been an awkward strait. So, on the whole, Harvey Wyndham had reason to go back to London with a contented mind, for all that he had "missed his tip," as he said, with Marcy Tremouille, and had not made Mrs. Aylott in love with him, as he at one time hoped and partly intended. It would have been a pleasurable excitement; and Harvey's idea of heaven was a pleasurable excitement.

Soon after his departure St. John Aylott was

as usual at the Hall, but unlike himself to-day —restless, talkative, and excited. But then he was often unlike himself now; since Richard Norton's visit having become painfully changeable, one day all gloom and deathly silence, another all recklessness and talk, as if the day was too short for all he had to say, and the ordinary routine of life too cold for the burning fever possessing him. To-day he was talking loudly and bitterly of Richard Norton, and saying how deceived and disappointed in him he had been—the old family lawyer, he said—a man made by the Aylotts (which was not strictly true by the way, but then strictness of truth is not a common thing with an angry speaker), a man to whom they had paid thousands—yet in a certain affair that had lately happened—no matter what it was—he had turned against him in the basest way. It was one of the most cold-blooded things he had ever known, he said; a thing which he would never forgive, and which few people would believe if they were told all the circumstances.

Then, with a dark look and bitter emphasis he added, "But he has done for himself with me! I shall take my affairs out of his hands, and never go near him for any business matter again. I have trusted him too long as it is, partly out of respect to my father, who had a high regard for him:—I wish to heaven he had not! —that man was his curse!" he said parenthetically; "but I will not be under his control any longer. For the future I am my own steward. Richard Norton has lost the Aylott business!"

"Take care," said Mr. Tremouille kindly. "If you have not been used to business you will burn your fingers, depend upon it! Experience must be bought you'll say—so it must—but have a care that you do not buy yours too dearly."

"I am not afraid," said St. John. "Harvey Wyndham tells me he can put me up to one or two good things: and he seems to know what he is about."

"Hum!" said Mr. Tremouille drily.

"I always distrust a poor man who says that he can put others up to good things," said

Gilbert. "Men who have not sixpence for themselves, and who live on credit, are so often able to make their friends' fortunes! I have seen so much of that abroad, and I know so exactly what it means. Take care, Aylott!"

"Thank you, I am not a boy," said St. John Aylott disagreeably.

"Harvey Wyndham is a clever fellow I know," put in Mr. Tremouille; "but I would not endorse him, and would trust him only so far as I could see him, and not an inch farther. He is a slippery fellow depend upon it! and it is just these slippery fellows who do the mischief."

"He cannot do me much mischief, let him do what he likes," said St. John. "I will not give him the run as I did with Mr. Norton, and if I do look after things myself I defy the devil himself to cheat me."

Gilbert and Mr. Tremouille looked at each other.

"What has he sold you?" asked Gilbert quietly.

"Doña Marias," said St. John with some pride in the glibness of his formula.

"And what the deuce are they?" asked Mr. Tremouille with evident contempt.

"Silver smelting mines in Spain," said St. John a little loftily.

"I know them," Gilbert said; "silver smelting mines in Granada, lying to the south?"

"Yes, silver smelting mines in Granada lying to the south," said St. John proudly.

"Well! you are more sanguine than I! I would not buy a quarter of a share in the concern," said Gilbert.

"And you are more cautious than I," retorted St. John. "The shares are a hundred and fifty, risen from twenty; and they have paid the original shareholders cent. per cent. for ten years."

"And now being at their highest they will fall," said Gilbert.

"You are a little arbitrary in your predictions, are you not?" said St. John with a satirical smile.

"I only speak of what I know," Gilbert answered. "And this I do know that it is just as

dangerous to buy when a thing has gone up to a fancy price, as when it is going down. It is sure destruction either way—the one way by fever, and the other by atrophy."

"I shall make the trial," said St. John.

"Think it out," urged Mr. Tremouille. "I should be sorry if you came to grief, and I know what dabbling in shares means—hey Gilbert? so did your poor father."

"I have made up my mind," said St. John. "I have been swindled long enough—only four per cent. on the average, and money selling at seven!" discontentedly.

"Better that safe, my boy, than twenty per cent. and ruin," said Mr. Tremouille.

"I know all that," St. John answered, "but I do not intend to be ruined, and I will try for the twenty per cent."

And both Gilbert and Mr. Tremouille saw that further remonstrance was useless, and that St. John might get angry, but that there was no chance of his becoming reasonable.

"Harvey Wyndham had got the length of his

foot," said the old man afterwards, speaking to Gilbert: "and if his shoes pinch him he cannot say that he has not been warned!"

Just then Marcy came into the breakfast-room where the three men were standing. She looked lovely to-day. Her dress was fresh and becoming, her countenance quite animated for her, and being more than usually affected she was more than usually soft and feline. As she glided in with that creeping step and undulating motion of hers, even Gilbert thought her "dangerous," while St. John secretly wished that she had been Isola, or that Isola had been more like her, he scarcely knew which—at all events that his wife had been as supple, as soft, as yielding, as flattering, as was Marcy Tremouille of the Hall.

"What a serious-looking party!" laughed the girl in her flute-like voice, looking from each to each. "Papa! what is it all about?"

"About, gipsy? nothing that would interest you!"

She went to him, and clasped both her hands

through his arm, looking up into his face. "If it interests you, papa, would it not interest me too?" she asked.

Her father patted her downy dimpled cheek. "What a little coaxer it is!" he said fondly.

"Because I love you, papa!" was her answer, "and when one loves any one, everything about them interests us. Doesn't it?" she asked of both Gilbert and St. John, meaning each to take the question specially to himself, and to believe that she meant him by her words.

Presently she looked round the room, as if for a ribbon or a bird, or anything else that might have got hidden and put away; and then she said, "Where is Isola, St. John? why did you not bring her? There now!" before he could answer, "Isola is a case in point! Look at her, what an interest every one takes in her, because they love her! Why I am sure, papa, if she had not been married, you would have made her my mamma-in-law, dear thing! and what a sweet mamma-in-law she would have been too! And as for Harvey Wyndham, he was quite wild about her?—

was a successful speculator. He had nearly obtained his consent to be put in the way of one or two good things, but though St. John hung back, and refused to take action just at present, yet Harvey knew that it would come sooner or later, and that the hook had struck though the fish might not be landed. And this would be a good thing for him, knowing as he did how the manipulation of another man's money gives a power second only to the manipulation of one's own.

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am always saying things to vex you, cousin Gilbert!" pouting. "I do not know what I should do if papa and Mr. Aylott were as cross to me as you are!"

"You would be better for a little wholesome discipline, my cousin Marcy," said Gilbert more sternly than he had ever spoken before. "Now Aylott, which it is?—Marcy's target or Hern Pool?"

"Miss Tremouille, of course," said St. John stiffly.

"And we'll come to you later in the day," said Marcy.

"As you will," he answered coldly, and left the room.

"I am so glad!" thought Marcy radiantly. "Now I have made him jealous!"

She was mistaken. He was not jealous, he was only annoyed at this silly flirtation with St. John Aylott. But he had said all he could, and more would make mischief rather than do good. And as Mr. Tremouille saw no harm in what was going on, but on the contrary, sanctioned Marcy's

intimacy with St. John on her own grounds perhaps of the safety of married men, Gilbert was obliged to let things drift as they would, and to leave St. John and the girl to their own folly unchecked. For it was folly—silly, childish, contemptible folly he said to himself angrily. There was neither depth nor passion, neither the dignity of love nor the tragedy of guilt in it. Had it been less puerile, less shallow, it would have been worthier even though more sinful. As it was, it was playing with virtue, reputation, a wife's happiness, and the honour of two houses, for no stronger temptation than vanity, idleness, and folly. It was a great danger undertaken for a contemptible cause; and Gilbert Holmes was one of those to whom strength and truth deliberately accepting sin were better than levity and falsehood simply drifting into danger.

So he set out to Hern Pool with a heavy heart and in some anger, and Marcy and St. John were to meet him there at three o'clock in the afternoon.

It had come about of late that Gilbert and

Isola had seen more of each other than usual, and that the friendship between them had grown all the stronger for the more frequent intercourse. But it was a dumb friendship though a deep one; an understanding, not a confession. He knew nothing of course of what had happened on that eventful day of the lawyer's visit, but he saw that something had gone wrong, and that the young wife's happiness was broken up on more issues than one. He saw the coldness that had set in between her and her husband—a coldness which scarcely affected concealment now, though making no open demonstration of wrangling or bitter speeches—at least on her side; he saw that Isola was distressed and rather proud, St. John angry and estranged, and he wished that he was the girl's brother to set matters straight between them.

As her unhappiness became more evident to him, so did his manner to her grow more tender and respectful. Had he been a knight of old romance and she a lady set in a garden apart from all defilement of worldly cares and human sins, he

could not have been more nobly, chivalrously devoted; and had she been his sister by blood he could not have had less selfishness in his wish to serve her. But how could he serve her? Her unhappiness with her husband is dangerous ground to break with any woman; yet Gilbert was a man ready for danger in a good cause, and if by risking her displeasure he might contribute to her well-being, he would risk it; or if by braving that more subtle peril lying in private confidences with a young wife, he might do away with this estrangement and bring back a closer union with her husband, well! he would brave that too. He knew himself and he believed in her; and he made out between the two that he could be a safe friend to her, and might be a useful one; and that, though it would have been better if she could have had some woman to advise with, yet failing the sister might not the brother be of value? So thinking and thinking, he strolled on to Hern Pool and began the fishing which was to be the day's employment.

Now Hern Pool—Heron Pool in the uncor-

rupted tongue—had become rather a favourite object for a walk with Isola. She used often to go there with the nurse and baby, and wander by the river-side while they kept out in the freer air of the meadow. She liked to watch the flow of the hurrying stream—to see how it pattered among the stones and fretted about the larger boulders, so like the restless impatience of human life—to watch the little wavelets ever chasing, never overtaking, running on and on with eager haste to join the great sea and annihilation —she liked to see the dim shoals of fish passing like a cloud through the brown waters, to catch the rapid flash of the startled kingfisher, to hear the sudden plunge of the water-rat, or see the eddy left by the diving otter—she liked to watch the stately herons standing like voiceless sentinels on the stones, or flying with trailing legs across the stream—she liked to see the great blue dragon-flies skimming through the air, and to study the strange creatures that danced and darted on the surface of the quiet bays; she loved all forms of nature, more than she loved art

or literature—and Hern Pool was one of those rich bits of loveliness where nature is fuller and more abundant than elsewhere—one of those teeming bits of wood and water life where naturalist and artist alike are satisfied. And it had become a place specially dear to Isola's heart, and almost like a friend in her time of trouble. And to-day, as it chanced, she went there after luncheon; and to the very spot where Gilbert stood flicking his fly on the water, tempting the shy trout.

As she came through the trees, her graceful figure in its expression of womanly dignity quite unlike the creeping grace of Marcy, her light blue dress swelling in the soft south wind like the petals of some large flower, her golden hair glistening from under the drooping feather of her hat, and the look of sadness trying to be cheerful which was habitual to her now, upon her face, Gilbert felt his heart beat with a fuller throb of pleasure—the throb which the presence of one dear always brings, be the relation what it may, from simplest friendship up to wildest passion.

It was such a picture! he thought, as she came on through the green trees—such a mingling of strength and sweetness, of girlish innocence with womanly power! What grace and graciousness! —what a beautiful human nature! Ah, it was his ideal of a perfect woman!—and it was the woman of his own race, his sister and his friend. He went forward to meet her as she came up smiling; but he was pale, while she had flushed and brightened.

"I did not expect to see you here," she said, as if excusing herself. "Have you been here long?"

"Yes, since twelve o'clock," he answered.

"Are you alone?" she asked a little anxiously looking farther down the stream. "Did not my husband come with you?"

"No," said Gilbert Holmes. "He is coming presently."

"He was at the Hall then this morning? you left him there?"

"Yes. He and my cousin were to try her new target, and then they were to join me here."

"Where is Mr. Tremouille to-day?" She tried

to say this quite indifferently, as if the answer was of no moment to her.

"Gone into St. Michael's on business."

Isola felt her face flush deeper at this. She did not choose to complain, but she could not but feel. After a moment's painful embarrassment she said as if involuntarily, "I wish Marcy Tremouille was married."

"I do not think she will marry soon," said Gilbert. "I know that she wants to make a brilliant marriage and she has no opportunities here."

"I used to think that Mr. Wyndham liked her," said Isola.

"Liked her or her fortune?"

"Perhaps both," she answered.

"Do you know much of Mr. Wyndham, Mrs. Aylott?"

"No, very little. We knew him only for the time that he was here."

"Do you like him?"

"No, not at all. There is something about him that I do not trust."

"But your husband seems inclined to trust him," said Gilbert.

"Does he? I am sorry to hear it," gravely.

"Can you not prevent any great reliance, Mrs. Aylott? I fear your husband will find himself in a mess some day if he trusts too much to Harvey Wyndham. I ought not to say this perhaps, but one cannot help one's convictions."

"I have no influence over St. John," she said sadly. "I never had much, but now I have none." Tears came into her eyes as she spoke.

"That is a pity," said Gilbert. "It is a difficult thing to get back however lost, whether justly or unjustly. No house goes well where the woman has not influence."

"So I think too; but," smiling to take off any spirit of bitterness or complaint there might be in her words, "my husband has not much respect for women, and thinks them at best only ciphers to which men give all the value. But then I married so young," she added hastily. "Perhaps that is one reason why he has no respect for my opinion."

"It would be better for him if he had more," said Gilbert.

"Yes, it would," said Isola; "and far, far better if Marcy Tremouille had less," she added in a lower tone, but still clearly enough.

"She is a little fool!" cried Gilbert hastily. "I do not think that she is wilfully bad-hearted, but it is her levity and folly that spoil her. She never thinks of the mischief she may do. But not thinking does not mend the matter, does it?"

"She has done me more harm than she can ever undo again," said Isola very sadly. "I might have got over all the rest—even my sweet boy—had it not been for Marcy. But she has such a strange power of irritating St. John against me. I do not know what she says, of course, when I am not there, but she seems as if she made him hate me while he is with her; and before me even she says things that annoy him beyond measure. But I cannot take any notice of them—they are all said with so much seeming innocence, and so much caressing, that I cannot resent them."

"I cannot help you!" said Gilbert with a strange accent of angry despair. "If she were a man I should know what to do, but as it is you must protect yourself! Poor girl!" he murmured, "how I wish I could help her!"

"I should not have made that complaint of Marcy!" said Isola suddenly conscience-stricken. "I have said too much."

"Not to me—am I not your friend?" was Gilbert's answer, made with a certain loyal tenderness that touched Isola's very heart.

"Yes—and my only one, Mr. Holmes."

And then the sense of the utter loneliness and unfriended state in which she lived, came upon her with such pitiful force that strength, courage, reserve, and pride gave way, and burying her face in her hands she burst into a flood of tears: thus placing herself for ever in Gilbert's power, and at his feet had he been so minded.

It was very wrong of her, very foolish, weak, undignified, unwifely; but it was natural, poor soul; and Gilbert Holmes was strong enough for his own part to understand her weakness, and to

sympathize with it. It is only the weak themselves who are hard and impatient with weakness.

Deeply ashamed of herself Isola dried her eyes as quickly as she could; feeling that she would very much like to punish herself for her folly, if she only knew how, and thinking with dismayed pride and conscience; "Oh, what will he think of me! what will he think of poor St. John!" while longing to tell him that indeed St. John was not unkind to her, and that Marcy had done her no harm, and that life was all a long summer's day with her, carpeted with flowers and full of music and happiness. But she could not manage this somehow, so she said nothing. She only laughed a little hysterically, and pushed back her hair, murmuring as if to herself, "How silly!" then looked at Gilbert doubtfully. He was quietly fastening a fly on to his line when she looked, and she was not enough of an angler to see that he was fastening it awry, and that his work would all have to be done again.

Soon after this she turned to go.

"I hope you will not put a wrong construction on my folly," she said with embarrassment. "I should be very sorry if you thought my husband treated me so ill that I have cause to cry over it! I was just overcome for the moment, but it was all nonsense."

"I know! I know!" said Gilbert Holmes. "Don't distress yourself, Mrs. Aylott, I quite understand you. I only want you to feel for me as your true friend and brother," he continued, speaking rather hurriedly. "Remember this—while I am alive you are not friendless. I ask for no greater gift from fate than the power to serve you, and if ever I can, with my very life I would!"

She held out her hand to him. "You are my friend," she said earnestly, "I know and feel that you are!"

"God bless you, Mrs. Aylott!" said Gilbert, pressing her hand between both of his warmly. "It is something in one's life to be understood and believed in. God bless you!"

"Good bye," she said, raising her eyes to his face, and "thank you."

They grasped each other's hands with a strong and fervent pressure—the loyal clasp of two friends neither ashamed nor afraid; and then Isola turned and left him, rounding the corner of the road which hid her from Hern Pool just as St. John Aylott and Marcy Tremouille came by the opposite way.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOÑA MARIA HACIENDA.

INVESTMENTS, like friendships, go very much in circles, and men support each other in buying shares as they do in making a neighbourhood. The Doña Maria Hacienda Silver Smelting Mines had been a favourite speculation in Harvey Wyndham's set, and Harvey himself had made a good thing of them from first to last; having certain intimate acquaintances among the directors, and getting, on customers brought in, secret percentages not passed at the monthly audit. He told St. John the strict truth when he said that the scheme had been thoroughly successful, and that the original shareholders

had been paid cent. per cent. for the last five years; but, of late, certain ugly rumours had brought down the high-flying price of one hundred and fifty to which the originally twenty pound shares had risen, and the actual selling price was now only a hundred.

The Doña Maria was a private concern, not in the public market at all; and as the company was anxious to keep it quiet and not let the Philistines rush in to share the spoil, there was not much chance of verifying anything. The agents, of course, upheld it as the best investment afloat; the solicitor to the company was one of the largest shareholders; the directors would as soon have thought of recognizing a national bankruptcy as owning to any unsound spot in the Doña Maria's constitution; and the shareholders who wanted to sell were naturally interested in bulling the market to the utmost of their ability: so that accounts had to be taken on trust, and the truth was about the last thing that could be proved. By which it came about that when St. John invested five thousand

pounds in Doña Marias, at a hundred and fifty each, he had no idea that his friend Harvey, who kindly managed the purchase and transfer, simply pocketed one-fifth of that sum; and that when he suddenly appeared in society as having come into a legacy from an old aunt, which enabled him to repay that kindly loan of two hundred and odd, that it was paid out of the marginal fifth known as "the difference between the buying price and the selling." He paid back that two hundred scrupulously, and established his character with the dean's grandson as an honourable gentleman for ever after. He knew that when he drew the cheque, and calculated to a nicety the moral and pecuniary value of his honesty.

This affair of the Doña Maria Hacienda was the beginning of St. John's speculations under Harvey Wyndham's leadership: but by no means the last; the bait was too gorgeously feathered for that!

At this time it happened that another concern of the same kind was in process of establish-

ment at Tête d'Or, not far from Dinan: and this too was a concern in which Harvey took great interest, and of which he predicted a success equal to that of the Doña Maria. St. John invested largely. He was bitten with the mania for speculating, and he had faith in his adviser; so that Harvey had really little or no trouble in using him as his banker, and in making him believe in the substantiality of any bubble he chose to float before him. And knowing no more of business than a girl, and being as easy to influence if as difficult to guide, all that was needed was a picture brilliantly coloured—a great show of deference to his opinion—some cunning allusions to his clearness of perception and the capital head he had for business details—the old mixture of delusion and cajolery—and the thing was done. St. John gave himself up to the hand of his financial Mentor, and did as he was bid with edifying docility. But if you had asked him, he would have said that he was acting quite independently, and from his own unassisted judgment.

No one was more glad than Jane Osborn when she knew the good fortune which had befallen Harvey Wyndham, for all that it cut into the pleasantness of her own life, and made her beloved "press-work" less dear and delightful. But she was an unselfish woman, hard and unlovely as she was, and knew how to be glad in the friend's joy which was her own sorrow. When Harvey went to see her after his return to London she received him as a neophyte might have received his high priest, or as a private would receive his captain—a whole world of reverence expressed in her abrupt phrase—

"This is kind of you to look me up so soon, Wyndham! I'm right glad you have come back to us: things have been dark and queer somehow without you."

"I should not have had such a glorious holiday if it had not been for you," was Harvey's answer graciously made. "You have been a capital fellow, Jane, and have been of invaluable service to me."

"Don't say that!" said honest Jane, all a-glow.

"It has been such a pleasure to work for you! I can't tell you, Wyndham, how I have enjoyed it!"

"You have given great satisfaction in the office: I have half a mind to be jealous," he answered. "Do you know that?"

"I have done my best, that's all I know; but it may have been a bad best, as I said once before I remember, mayn't it?—and yet I don't think it has been somehow," said Jane.

"Bad! no, it has been first-rate! Smith said to me only to-day that 'Mr. John'—you know he calls you 'Mr. John'?"—

"Yes," laughed Jane, tossing up her hair; "and I told him that I took it as the greatest compliment he could pay me."

"So he meant it, for he told me again to-day that you worked like a man and were as reliable as one."

"I am glad of that," she said frankly. "But then he himself has been very kind to me, and has pulled me through many a time when I should have been aground else."

"He is a good old fellow," said Harvey patro-

nizingly. "A bit of a duffer between ourselves, but a decent old chap as times go."

If Harvey Wyndham had not bought five thousand pounds' worth of Doña Marias for the price of four, and pocketed the difference, he would not have spoken so disrespectfully of his former chief. But a balance at his banker's changes a man's estimate of others, as well as his lines of relation so marvellously!

"He has been good enough to me I must say," repeated Jane gratefully. "Not like you, you know, Wyndham—not so clever nor full of resources—a different kind of cleverness every way. He has read a good deal. It was quite queer how he used to tell me to refer to this book and that for all sorts of odd little facts. He was as good as an encyclopædic reference to me. It was not so much that he knew what one wanted as where it was to be found. You, now, would have told me the fact."

"We have got our knowledge by different ways," said Harvey. "Smith has always been a plodding bookworm. I have read as much and

quite as much to the purpose too perhaps," consequentially—"and I have seen and heard a great deal more."

"Yes; and that's what we women want so much—that varied knowledge got by men—the knowledge you pick up among each other at clubs, and lectures, and in studios and places. You have such different friends—one is an artist, another an engineer, another a chemist, and so on; and if you have brains you can keep yourselves informed of the last things in art science and politics. But those of us who have any brains—and they are precious few! get no help from one another, except about babies or fashions, according to the kind of thing the woman is. Women have no speciality worth an hour's serious talk; and then it's 'shocking mamma!' and 'what a bold thing that Jane Osborn is!' if we make friends of men that can help us."

Harvey laughed, and looked at Jane curiously, thinking to himself that if ever woman was privileged by nature to escape the danger of such like misrepresentations it was she, the least lovely

and the least loveable woman who had as yet come within his sphere.

"By the by," she asked, "how is Isola getting on with her baby? Poor little man! I am glad she took him; for though I was quite willing to bring him up, and do my best for him, I did not blind myself to the fact that he would have been no end of a nuisance here."

"And might have been no end of an embarrassment in the future, Jane," said Harvey significantly.

"What do you mean, Wyndham?—putting him out in life?" she asked unconsciously.

"No, I mean when the real facts of his birth were forgotten, and folks chose to talk."

"What? to say he was my child?" asked Jane quite directly.

"Yes," answered Harvey.

"What an idea!" laughed Jane showing all her teeth—they were small and square. "The notion of any one thinking such a thing of me! Why, Wyndham, I wouldn't marry even, still less go and make a fool of myself."

"No? you would not marry me, Jane, if I asked you?"

He meant nothing by his words. They were just the idle words of a man who could not speak to any woman—not even to Jane Osborn—without some dash of gallantry.

"I don't know about you, Wyndham," was her answer made quite gravely, "we are chums—but I don't know how anything else would answer."

"Nor I!" laughed Harvey. Then changing the subject suddenly he said, "Jane! do you know that I am off the 'Comet' now?"

She quite paled as he spoke. "Off the 'Comet'!" she repeated.

"Yes, a blessed old aunt died lately and left me a little money, so I am going to see if a little won't make a mickle; I think I can do better for myself than as sub to Smith."

"Work won't go on so well without you," said Jane sorrowfully.

"You shall have more though, Jane. I spoke to Smith to-day about that and other things, and he promises you as much as you can do, old lady,

so don't be down-hearted. If you are not to quite step into my shoes, you are to have my slippers, and that's as much as any woman in the world could have!"

"I'd rather have less, and you still on the paper," said Jane, the tears half starting—starting just so much as to make her eyes dark and tender.

"Why Jane! what's this! I thought you cared more for work than for anything else!" he said with a kindly manner of banter. "I thought you would rather have a 'leader' accepted than anything the profane world could give you."

"Yes. I am proud of being on the press, I know," said Jane; "I am proud of being able to do the work of a man among men, but I'd rather you were there too."

"Oh! I won't lose sight of you," said Harvey condescendingly. "I'll come and look you up every now and then; and I may have one or two city articles that I shall want written: and if I don't do them myself I'll coach you. I won't lose sight of you, Jane, depend upon it."

"I hope not, Wyndham!" said Jane fervently. "You have been my first friend."

"But not the last let us hope!" taking her hand in his patronizing way.

"The best!" said Jane. "By the by, tell me something about the Newfield folks," she suddenly asked. "How is that pretty girl?"

"Which girl?" said Harvey as if considering. "Your cousin Mrs. Aylott, Miss Varley, or Miss Tremouille?"

"Miss Tremouille," said Jane.

"Oh, quite well, thanks!" indifferently. "Carrying on a desperate flirtation with St. John Aylott!"

"My goodness!" ejaculated Jane.

"I don't quite understand that—my goodness at the impropriety of such a thing?—or my goodness at what?"

"Well, at the folly of flirting with any man at all, then with a married man, and then with St. John Aylott, of all the men under the sun!" said Jane disdainfully.

"He is no favourite of yours?"

"Favourite! No! I hate the man! I never despised any one more, I think, with his fine gentleman airs and high and mighty ways!—and such a weak fool as he is too! Isola is far too good for him!"

"So I think," said Harvey; "and so does Mr. Gilbert Holmes if I don't mistake."

Jane looked at him earnestly.

"Yes, you may look; but fact I can assure you!" he laughed.

"Well!" said Jane drawing a deep breath and sniffing. "You seem to have been a nice lot down there! But Isola herself?"

"Oh! Isola as you call her is an angel!" said Harvey Wyndham.

Mrs. Osborn came into the room just as the last words were being said.

"So she is!" she cried enthusiastically; "and she sent me the sweetest little brooch you can fancy, and Jane such a dear little buckle! Not Lowther Arcade stuff you know, but real Bond Street jewellery."

"So of course she is an angel!" said Jane satirically.

"Of course, my dear," repeated Mrs. Osborn decidedly.

"It would be a bad look-out for her if her angel-hood had no better basis than good taste in jewellery!" sniffed Jane.

"Jane, don't be rude!" said Mrs. Osborn with the finest shade of dignity. "And you need not speak so pedantically when you are only at home. I declare you are worse than Johnson's Dictionary, that I and poor Theodora had to learn by pages, and never knew how to pronounce the hard words, or whether it was to be gymnastic or jymnastic, and Miss Tholes our governess didn't quite know either."

Jane looked at Harvey. "And that is my companion!" said her face; and Harvey's answered, "Poor soul! I pity you!" as distinctly as if voices had spoken and not only eyes and muscles.

When Harvey went away that day Jane felt dispirited and sad. She didn't know what ailed her, and she could not understand why she should be so dull. I am afraid her own formula

was "down in the mouth;" but that she was out of sorts with herself and her life she knew quite well. And her mother noticed it too.

"Why Jane! what is the matter with you!" she said. "You look quite unhappy! What has Mr. Wyndham been saying to you to make you look so dull?"

"Nothing, mamma, and I am not unhappy," was Jane's curt reply.

"Oh! come now, Jeannette! You need not try to blind your dear mamma like that!" cried the little woman. "You look as miserable as possible, just as if you had been crossed in love. Is Mr. Wyndham going to be married?"

Jane sniffed and pushed back her tumbled hair very disdainfully.

"I'm sure I don't know, mamma," she said, "and what's more I don't care. What is his marriage to me?" vehemently.

"Well, my goodness me, Jane, don't be so cross! You really quite frighten me!" cried Mrs. Osborn.

"I hate such nonsense!" said Jane, not quite

so savagely though; "it is enough to make a saint cross."

"Which you are certainly not, dear Jane," said Mrs. Osborn.

Towards the evening, while Jane was sitting as usual in the unsavoury little room which had been the surgery, working hard and faithfully, also as usual, a knock came to the door, and a commissionaire delivered in a letter addressed to her.

"My gracious! what's this!" cried Mrs. Osborn, bustling into the den as she called it. "It don't look like one of your office letters, Jane—what ever can it be?"

"It's in Wyndham's handwriting," said Jane a little briskly.

"*Mr.* Wyndham's," said her mother.

Jane took no notice of the rebuke, but opened the packet, and opened it upon a ten pound note.

"My gracious!" cried Mrs. Osborn again.

Accompanying the money was a very kind letter of thanks, worded as Harvey could word his

letters, in the neatest manner, and with that pleasant suggestiveness of more left unsaid than what has been expressed, which gives a double value to thanks or love. It was not in payment of her work, he said, but a mere acknowledgment of his gratitude. Had he known what she would have liked, he would have made her a present; but all things considered, he thought it best to send the money frankly, and let her employ it as she preferred. He could not give a higher proof of his reliance on her than by thus trusting in her good sense and understanding; he should have been afraid to have done such a thing to many women, but he was sure he could trust his "chum" and fellow-pressman, and that she would not show any foolish pride or nonsensical delicacy—quite inadmissible between sworn friends and brothers as they were. Then he ended with expressions of the sincerest friendship and the like; and begging Jane to rely on him at all times, and in all circumstances.

"There, Jane, didn't I say so!" cried Mrs. Osborn.

The tears were in Jane's large eyes. She dashed them away so that her mother should not see them, but she did not dare trust herself to answer.

"A thorough gentleman!—quite a thorough gentleman!" repeated Mrs. Osborn; "and this is very pretty of him, and just what he should have done. It is such a comfort to have to deal with gentlemen!—so different to the men of your poor papa's set! That's the kind of thing I was used to when a girl! I declare it is quite refreshing to come back to it again. Why don't you speak, Jane! There you sit as dumb as you please, and have not so much as thank you for Mr. Wyndham. And he so good to you too! I never saw such a girl as you are, Jane. You might be a stock or a stone!"

"Well, mamma, what shall I say?" said Jane with an effort. "I am perhaps as much obliged as you are, but you talk and I don't, that's all the difference."

"And what are you going to say to Mr. Wyndham?" asked her mother. "If you can't speak

to your own mamma I suppose you will to him. It is only to me, Jane, that you are so cold and silent."

"I shall thank him," said Jane curtly.

"And you won't send it back?" This was said in an anxious voice, Mrs. Osborn having profound fears of Jane's unreasonable "spirit."

"Send it back?" she cried. "Do you think I don't understand him better than that?"

"You dear, darling little Jeannette!" cried Mrs. Osborn, patting her daughter's turbulent head. "Upon my word you are getting quite sensible in your old age. And now, Jeannette, I'll tell you what we will do with the money; for as it's a present, you know, we need not spend it in housekeeping. You shall have a new frock, dear—one of those pretty grey and violets that are so much worn now—your poor papa has been dead nearly a year, so you may have half mourning for a new dress. Let me see! I can get a very good one for a pound, and the making won't be much if we can get Miss Hudson into the house; then you shall have a nice new shawl and

a bonnet, and I will have a new cloak and a bonnet, and an Athole crape gown. Shall it be that, Jenny? We shall have something to spare after all is done, and perhaps enough for a pair of boots each. It will set us up in clothes beautifully, and I shall be quite proud of my little girl in her new frock."

"Yes, you may spend it as you like," said Jane. "Give me ten shillings out of it, that's all."

"Certainly dear, but what for?" asked her mother a little doubtfully.

"Well, I should like to buy something that won't wear out and won't break, as a remembrance of him," said Jane. "Dresses and bonnets will wear out, but I should like to have something that won't."

"So you shall, dear! Quite a proper idea!" cried Mrs. Osborn approvingly. "And now, Jeannette, let us have tea, I am dying for a cup of tea; and Jeannette," friskily, "as it has been such a good day with us, I'll just send the girl out for some tea-cakes, and we'll have the apple

tart and a lobster salad for supper. We ought to make the day a real holiday!"

"Very well, mamma, make the day a real holiday in your own way," replied Jane a little wearily; "but now I must be alone, if you please, I have to finish my work by nine o'clock."

"I'll go, dear," said her mother bustling up. "I'm sure I don't want to disturb you, my dear, good girl. What should I do without my Jeannette, I'd like to know! dear old thing!" caressingly.

"But I must write," said Jane peremptorily; and her mother, with the humbled look that always came upon her face when Jane was peremptory, left her as she desired, and shut the door carefully upon her. And then Jane Osborn, hard, plain, abrupt, ungainly Jane, laid her face upon her crossed arms and sobbed as if her strong heart would break.

That night Mr. Henslow, one of the directors of the Doña Maria Hacienda, and Harvey Wyndham's chief acquaintance in that upper heaven, went home in such a state of good humour that

the wife of his bosom looked at him curiously, not understanding what could have so delighted him. The fact was, a short time since he had received a private letter from the manager of the mine in Spain, stating that things were looking bad—that the contracts could not be renewed—and that though there was the reserve fund of so many thousands to fall back upon, which would keep them afloat for a certain length of time, yet the affairs of the Lady Maria were certainly discouraging, and would it not be wise to dispose quietly of his liabilities? So Mr. Henslow did dispose quietly of some thirty shares to Harvey Wyndham, at a hundred and thirty each, knowing that they would soon not be worth more than the original twenty, and perhaps would be bought in by the company at that modest price. No wonder, then, that he was hilarious to a point rarely reached at home, for had he not concluded a master stroke of business, and might he not, perhaps, get rid of all his hundred shares by the same quiet means? The Doña Maria would pay her customary

dividends with customary regularity for another year; but when that year was over the shares would fall like lead, and it was more than doubtful if any fresh contracts could make golden wings wherewith to float them to their former height again. But in the meantime Mr. Henslow, who knew the stuff of which unknowing speculators are made, felt very sure that after the second dividend or so, the young man with money with which he was anxious to speculate—this incumbent's son and dean's grandson, inheriting the prescriptive ignorance of business peculiar to his clerical ancestry—would infallibly buy other thirty, or more shares; especially as Harvey Wyndham had made the purchase of these a matter of private favour to himself, assuring St. John that purchases were with difficulty effected, one or two at a time, at a hundred and sixty.

And the director was not mistaken. St. John Aylott was so charmed with the success of his first investment, that he besought Harvey to watc the market for him and buy him five

thousand pounds' worth more of la Doña Maria Hacienda Silver Smelting Mines. Which Harvey, after due delay, obligingly did buy; relieving Mr. Henslow of another batch of thirty shares—this time at a lower figure. For Harvey hearing rumours himself of la Doña Maria's shaky condition; and those unlucky contracts just expired and not renewed; with a rival in the field established not five miles off, and offering to smelt and carry at fifty per cent. less than la Doña—Harvey hearing all this, resolved to make Henslow, at least, act like an honest man. So he put it to him frankly—were they worth in the market at this present time more than a hundred? and Henslow with great candour owned they were not: but in the future, when the new contracts were signed, and when the new mine that was to be shortly opened, and that was already pledged to the Doña Maria, should be in full work, and when the rest of the contingencies whereof the golden wings were to be made had become actualities, they would go up again to their original figure—and higher. Still, as Harvey was

a friend, he might have the shares at the present low price of one hundred, though it was giving away fifty each and more. And Mr. Henslow chuckled at having again done the clever agent; and St. John paid the five thousand pounds without doubt or inquiry; and Harvey Wyndham's legacy from his old aunt seemed like the cruse of oil which did not fail but rather increased by use.

CHAPTER IX.

"GOD BLESS THEM."

It was one of Mr. Tremouille's pleasures to go on long riding excursions through the country with Marcy. There were many fine show places within a few days' travel of Newfield; here a ruined abbey, there a grand old castle, a cathedral to the left, a noted Elizabethan mansion to the right, and lovely scenery everywhere—being one of those highly cultivated park-like neighbourhoods where the drives are all beautiful, whether on the higher slopes whence could be seen the rich country lying like a fertile map below, or through the ferny lanes shadowed by forest trees and sweet with hedge-row flowers.

So that these excursions were delicious, even to Marcy, for all that she had no other companion but her father; consequently no one to say "how beautiful!" and "how exquisitely suggestive!" when she caressed and fondled him sweetly.

For Marcy was wise at least in this—she never abandoned herself at home, nor let her manners go slipshod and her temper set itself awry. She was false and artificial, but she had the good sense never to let the veil slip aside. As one of her governesses once said of her, "I wonder if Marcy Tremouille looks natural when she is asleep!" Being of this pattern then it was her best wisdom to maintain appearances unflinchingly; and she did maintain them; and as her father never knew her as other than his "mouse," so far her reign was secure.

Since the Aylotts came to the Hermitage there had been none of these expeditions; and now the summer was waning fast, and unless they took advantage of the young autumn there would be no possibility of any such outing this year. Upon which, after due consultation, it was agreed

that the two houses and Rosa Varley should take a four days' ride, the object of which was to be Ludlow Castle and the various points of interest between. All of which was safely accomplished without any disasters by the way either of mind or body. St. John did not flirt with Marcy more outrageously than usual; Marcy did not make more than her ordinary amount of mischief, and what she did make was by means just as shadowy and from motives apparently just as sweetly innocent and unconscious as was her wont; and the coolness between the young people was not more visible and not more embittered than heretofore. Indeed perhaps less so, for Gilbert made things pleasanter for Isola, and the presence of Rosa Varley broke up the exclusiveness of the party. So that on the whole the outing had been decidedly successful so far, and they were all sufficiently well-pleased with what they had seen.

Returning, and still two days' ride from home (it was a riding expedition, two grooms with the valises and waterproof cloaks accompanying)

while in a part of the country unknown to any of them, and entangled between a wild moor on the one side, and a net of cross-country lanes on the other, they one night got bewildered and belated. By some strange mishap the Ordnance map, always Mr. Tremouille's companion on these journeys, had been forgotten; so the direction of towns and villages was a little confused, and no one knew by what point of the compass to steer. At first it was good fun enough, but it soon became tiresome; and then a little annoying; and finally, as the darkness came down thick and heavy, more than a little dangerous. Every one behaved very well however, and even Marcy did not scream more than twice; while Rosa Varley kept her tears carefully concealed; and no one could read the annoyance on St. John's face in the dark. After a time they saw the lights of a town shining to the left across the moor, and making for it pretty correctly, found themselves at a place called Grassbridge, and before the door of the Blue Boar, the principal hotel, somewhere about eleven o'clock at night.

Something was evidently going on in the town beyond the bustle of what might have been market night. The streets were crowded, the shops were all opened, and the gas was flaring everywhere; at the hotel too there was no accommodation; and though the grooms tried all the inferior places above mere beershops, the answer was the same—every bed was taken, and nothing was to be had. Many people were making a night of it in the streets; and even the railway omnibuses and one or two old flies had been let out as sheds for the more luxurious. A fair was in progress and the assizes were on: so that a small town, doing generally but a languid foreign business, was likely to be overcrowded from such a sudden plethora of strangers. At last, after great persuasion and some mysterious displacements, a small room was found at the top of the house for the three ladies; while the gentlemen prepared to dispose themselves, together with some others, in the large central dining-room, among the uneasy horsehair chairs and earthenware spittoons with which that venerable apartment was garnished.

St. John was horribly disgusted at the whole arrangements. He was not a man to rough it in any way, and misadventures of this kind tried his dignity sorely. Gilbert of course took the mishap as a "bushman" would—quite content with everything, and prepared to make himself as abundantly comfortable as if his coat and valise had been a full service of blankets and eider down, and the hard boards of the dining-room floor the softest feather-bed within the four kingdoms. And old Mr. Tremouille, after a few full-flavoured interjections, followed his example, and made the best of what ill temper or displeasure would not mend. So the night began, and soon the last sound of roysterers within and without died away, and the hotel, like the town, slept.

It was still dark when St. John awoke suddenly. He was a light sleeper at all times, and in strange circumstances was like a woman in his nervous restlessnes. And now he started up suddenly with a quickened pulse, a dizziness of brain, and an agonizing sense of apprehension but too well known to him. He looked about

him. The gas was burning in the room, but some one had put out one light and lowered the other, so that all was in a faint obscurity, wherein he could dimly make out various dark figures lying on the floor, or dozing more or less uneasily in chairs set against the wall. Nothing was stirring; and the dread was clearing itself away as he laid himself down for sleep again, when he thought he heard something that sounded like the crackling of fire, at the same time that a strong smell of burning wood stole into the room. He listened for some little time, then got up and opened the door. The house was full of smoke, and the crackling and the smell of burning wood were now unmistakable.

"Fire!" shouted St. John Aylott. "Good God! the house is on fire!"

"Fire! fire!" burst from various parts of the house, as the frightened inmates came crowding through the dark old-fashioned passages and down the crazy wooden stairs.

"Save yourselves!" shouted St. John, "the fire is below!"

Gilbert never forgot the face of maniacal dread that was turned for a moment, wild and haggard, inward to the room, as St. John Aylott, rushing madly forward, plunged into the crowding wreaths of smoke rolling up the lower staircase, and was the first to find himself safe and scatheless in the street. Crazed with dread as he was, and possessed with but the one brute instinct of self-preservation, he had forgotten Isola—Marcy—every one but himself; and it was only after some moments had elapsed, and he had fully realized his own safety, that he remembered them and others still left within the walls of the burning house.

"Where is Marcy?" cried Mr. Tremouille frantically. "I must go for her, Gilbert!"

"No! save yourself while there is time!" said Gilbert taking him by the arm. "The fire is below; there will be no escape soon. I will go for Marcy and Isola. I shall be of more use than you."

"I cannot leave her!" said the old man, weeping and trembling, and hurrying a little helplessly, if feverishly, towards the stairs.

"Save yourself while you can," repeated Gilbert firmly, holding him back. "Leave the women to me."

Moments, seconds even, were precious. The smoke came rolling up in denser columes, more stifling and more heated; the glare of the fire below struck through the grey vapour, and threw a strange fantastic light upon the walls; flames were even curling up the spiral balustrades, and the lower steps of the stairs were already charred and smoking.

"I cannot go down there!" said Mr. Tremouille, drawing back. "I may as well die with her."

As he said this in a despairing voice—the voice of a man from whom all hope and vigour have suddenly gone—the window of the room where they were standing was thrown open from the outside, and a man leaped in.

"Any one here?" he called out.

"Yes! here!" shouted Gilbert, "here is a gentleman—take care of him and see him safe."

"Let me go for my Marcy!" pleaded Mr. Tremouille; but the policeman taking him by the

arm hurried him to the window against which stood the ladder.

"You'll do no good a-going for them, sir," he said firmly, as he almost forced him out on the ladder, which was only of ordinary size, and reached no higher than the first floor.

"My child! my child!" cried the poor father looking vaguely to the upper windows, "a thousand pounds to any one who will save her!"

A dozen men pressed forward.

"Where is she? does the gentleman know her window? A thousand pounds did you say? that's a tidy sum to risk one's life for! Here, you Bill, keep back, it ain't no call of yours, let a better man nor you do the job," wrangled a couple of men by the ladder. But though there was much hubbub and confusion, and dashing up and down, and shouting and gesticulating, nothing definite was done; partly because there was no one to command, and partly because there were no adequate means at hand. The mob swayed and shouted and toiled and desired all in vain; the fire went on consuming the house, and the

helpless women left behind were as far as ever from salvation. The very excitement paralyzed direct exertion, and the multitude of would-be helpers neutralized each other's efforts.

The lower half of the house was now burning rapidly. The flames were licking out of the basement windows and creeping up the crumbling face of the stuccoed façade. Part of the lower staircase has fallen in with a crash, and the large dining-room had fairly caught and was a-blaze with the rest. Presently there appeared at two of the upper windows a group of women's heads; three pressed together at the first, and a solitary one at the second. This was a poor servant girl who had slept in a kind of loft alone and with fatal soundness, and who now stood, crazed with terror, shrieking for help to the crowd below. Of the three others, two also were shrieking piteously, but one, the tall, golden-haired woman with the firm white shoulders and the round white arms, stood pale and silent, watching the chances for escape quietly and vigilantly. Suddenly a shriller louder scream burst from

the servant girl; and the three clustered together saw her leap frantically from the window, falling with a dull and heavy crash on the pavement, as the poor wretch shattered her skull against the kerb. Immediately after this a voice called out "Isola! Marcy!" and Gilbert Holmes, guided by Marcy's shrieks, burst into the room.

"Oh, cousin Gilbert! how glad I am you have come!" cried Marcy, flinging herself into his arms; while Rosa, faint and weeping, and sobbing out "Oh save me! save me!" clung to him tenaciously, as if contact alone would give them all salvation. Isola gathered close to his side also, but did not touch him. She was quite composed and collected, evidently able to help and would not hinder.

"Is St. John safe?" she asked in a quick but clear voice; "and Mr. Tremouille?"

"Both," he answered. "Now I must save all of you."

"Those first," said Isola quite quietly, as if she had been arranging a mere amusement. "Will you have the sheets and blankets?"

"Yes," he said.

Quick as thought she stripped them from the two small beds laid on the floor, and Gilbert knotted them strongly together. Then tying one end round Rosa—she trembling and fainting and falling together in a limp heap, so that Isola had to hold her, while Marcy uttered short and piercing little shrieks at intervals—he lowered her gently into the streets, and saw her taken possession of by the men who stood nearest. She was without natural protection in the group; and it was an instinctive regard for that loneliness which made him secure her safety first.

When it came to Marcy's turn to be bound and lowered, they had a more troublesome business than even with limp Rosa. Marcy was frightened and hysterical, and by this time had got almost beyond control. Isola had to hold her back by main force to prevent her flinging herself out of the window, and Gilbert lost some precious moments in his struggle to secure her. At last however she was overpowered, and lowered as Rosa had been. It was more perilous

then, for the flames were leaping from the windows with wilder force, and every moment mounting higher. But she was safely lowered in spite of the greater peril; and Isola, standing by the window, saw her caught to her father's heart; and then the crowd surged round them both, huzzaing, and they were led away to a friendly shelter.

"Now it is your turn," said Gilbert, as he was drawing back the sheeted cord; but just as he spoke the flames burst out from the first floor with one huge flare, and caught the linen as it passed. They looked at each other, and Isola laid her hand in his, but neither spoke; that silent grasp was more eloquent than speech, and as reassuring. For in the very presence of an appalling death they were neither affrighted nor discouraged, but on the contrary filled with a strange and solemn peace, as if some great beauty was about them and some divine joy awaited. The world seemed to have gone very far off from them, as they stood there hand in hand with death beside them; but God seemed very near

them, and each looked wonderfully beautiful to the other.

The room was now dense with smoke; the floor was crackling and getting hot to their feet; in one corner little flickering tongues every now and then ran up the angle, precursors of the terrible outburst to come; no ladder could live against those flaming windows even had there been one long enough, though one all too short was brought, and a man whom Isola recognized as their groom ran distractedly up and down, till beaten back by the flames. Far as the eye could reach it rested on a tossing sea of upturned faces, illumined by the red light. To the east the day was breaking, and Isola remembered long after the strange effect of the golden light in one broad line along the sky contrasted with the lurid glare of the fitful flames; and how calm and peaceful looked the one and how wild and fierce and turbulent the other. She remembered too the mingling of the sounds—the roar of the flames, and the crackling and falling of the wood-work as it caught and fell in successive

portions, with the hoarse voices of the excited crowd shouting like Mænads and Bacchanals. She was preternaturally calm, and her senses just as preternaturally acute; it seemed to her as if she saw and noted every face of that upturned surging sea, as if every line and shadow and colour was distinctly photographed on her brain, never to be forgotten nor confused. But among them all she did not see her husband, though she recognized, and even smiled to, the two grooms who had accompanied them—their own and the Tremouilles'.

"This is our only chance, Isola," then said Gilbert calmly. "Can you venture?"

He pointed to a small wall-band that ran along the house, just below the uppermost windows, and which he saw ran along the façade of the next house too, without a break. It was very small, very narrow, but it was their only chance.

"I will hold your hand," he said, seeing that she blenched just for a moment. "Can you venture? It is this or death."

As he spoke the little flickering tongues running up the farther angle burst out, and the flames leaped madly through the floor.

Isola was deadly white, but she neither wept nor trembled, nor did her heart throb quicker than usual, nor her breath come faster; a little deeper perhaps, and her pulses beating with unusual force, but no confusion, and no excitement.

"I will go with you," she said in a clear voice.

Gilbert took her hand and held it in his with a firm strong pressure; still holding it, he got out of the window, and stood with naked feet upon the narrow band. Then she followed him, and the two walked slowly on, their right hands clasped together—with their left steadying themselves against the wall. The crowd in the streets was hushed as if by magic. Not a voice was to be heard, not a murmur, not a sound; only the hissing and roaring of the fire, and the falling of the charred wood. Once only a woman's voice said distinctly, "God bless them!" as they crept slowly along their perilous way. It sounded

rarely sweet and full of faithful prayer to Isola, and it seemed as if God had heard and given her strength as the woman spoke.

Clinging to the wall, holding that brave man's hand in hers—herself as brave and as unfaltering as he—her naked feet clasping the narrow band, and her golden hair streaming far and wide over her shoulders and about her marble throat, her white petticoat with its low body and short sleeves showing her neck and arms and marking out the undulating lines of her supple body as she pressed close against the wall, Isola looked like some angel-woman to the crowd watching below; and as she slowly passed from the red light of the flames into the golden light of the breaking day, every breath was hushed and every heart stood still in mingled hope and awe. That transit of a few feet and not many moments seemed hours to both the watchers and the watched. On every slow and clinging footstep hung the issues of eternity, and even the dullest soul among them all understood something of the special horror and the special beauty of the scene.

Thus slowly walking hand in hand across the dull red façade they reached the window of the next house: and Gilbert raising the sash entered first, still firmly clasping her hand. Then he lifted her in after him, and held her to his heart —saved.

Then the crowd burst forth into a frantic yell of relief. Men shouted and huzzaed till they were hoarse, and ran hither and thither in aimless excitement: a few wept like women, and the women sobbed like children; some of the more religious sort, the Baptists and the Shakers, broke out into prayers and hymns, and some hurrahed and clapped their hands as if it had been a favourite piece played off for their diversion. All seemed drunk with the terrible joy of that perilous rescue, and it was as if each had saved a friend in those few awful moments. The fire might rage as it liked now, the point of the day was over. The excitement of the people when the burning rafters fell, and when streams of flaming spirit flowed out along the gutter in a moving line of fire, was only secondary to what

had been; and not even when the roof fell in, shooting up a pyramid of smoke and flame and huge bright sparks far into the grey sky, did it excite half the sensation that would have been, had not Gilbert and Isola walked barefooted along that narrow band, and saved their lives by their faith and courage. It was a thing which not the youngest of them could forget, and the like of which not the oldest had ever seen. The time of the great fire at the Blue Boar, when the lady and gentleman walked along the house wall, would make a dating time for Grassbridge from henceforward, as the Greeks dated from their best Olympic games, or the Romans from the most sumptuous feast of their most ambitious consul.

But they were saved; together and mutually helpful. Was it wrong in them to feel that they would have bought their present state at the cost of a peril, even greater than that through which they had passed?

"You have saved my life," said Isola in a low voice, looking up into Gilbert's face with a reve-

rent kind of gratitude in her own, and pressing his hand fervently to her breast.

"We saved each other," he answered. "My sister!" he murmured softly, putting back the falling hair from her pale forehead.

She looked at him again—her eyes were dark and tender, and her lips were quivering with smiles and tears together. "Brother Gilbert!" she said softly.

"Yes! brother and sister for life!" he replied, "friends in time and through eternity!"

That mean and squalid room looked very beautiful to them both as they stood for a brief instant in its silent security, listening to the crash of the the falling house, and to the cries of the noisy crowd. A whole lifetime seemed to be concentrated in that instant, and the silence between them was as solemn as a sacramental pledge; but they did not stay long. Still hand in hand, as if clinging to a symbol which was soon to be destroyed, they went through the deserted house, and so down into the thronged street, where the people cheered them as they came till the very

garden trees outside the town shook as in a passing wind. They were led across the way to a draper's shop, where the Tremouilles and Rosa Varley had been taken; and where they found poor Rosa still in a limp and fainting heap, and Marcy, graceful and beautiful as ever, in a fit of not too boisterous hysterics, which Mr. Tremouille, aided by the head physician of Grassbridge, vainly tried to check. St. John Aylott was nowhere to be seen. But Mr. Tremouille assured Isola that he was quite safe—he had been there only a few moments since—but he believed he had gone into the street again to see if he could render any assistance.

Presently he came in, with still the look of personal care—that nameless oiled, combed, and smoothened air so peculiarly his—as fresh as ever on him. His face and hands were a little blackened, but his hair was as picturesque, his dress as orderly, his gentlehood as untouched as if a fire in which his wife had been saved by a kind of miracle—and saved by no help of his—had been a thing of quite ordinary occurrence

demanding no special excitement nor derangement of graceful habits.

"I have been looking for you!" he said hastily to Isola, as she flung herself upon his neck. In this hour of supreme exaltation she was yearning only for reunion; death had passed so near to her, that she felt as if his wings had swept away all the small discomforts that had been between them. So near upon severance for ever, she only longed for reconciliation: and the Isola now clinging to his breast was the Isola her husband had regretted, and had longed in vain to bring back from the gulf of the past.

"Why Isola! you are almost naked!" were St. John's first words uttered in a tone of intense annoyance. "And with bare feet too! and that dirty rabble to have seen you like this! Upon my soul it is too annoying."

This was said in low voice, inaudible to the rest, but it fell on Isola like a shower of ice in the midst of a fever. Always himself!—always his pride, his feelings, his rights—never self-forgetfulness, never the free giving of generous love.

She drew herself out of his arms, and turned away. "I do not think people look much at dress at such times," she said.

"But why have you no shoes like the others?" he asked again.

"We could not have walked along the band unless with bare feet," she answered.

"What band?" he asked. "I know nothing of your escape, Isola," in an injured tone, as if a secret had been hidden from him. "I only knew that you were safe if with Mr. Holmes," satirically; "so I gave my attentions where they were wanted—to Miss Tremouille and Miss Varley."

And the dark, angry, half-maniacal expression very frequent on his face now, crossed like a cloud lighted through with fire.

"What band?" he repeated harshly.

She told him of their escape, but very simply and hurriedly—glossing over Gilbert's courage and her own firmness, and making as little of it as possible, and as if it had been quite an easy and ordinary occurrence. She looked up only once while she spoke; and once she looked at

Gilbert; and her face then took up the tale, and completed what her voice had left unsaid.

"Well, go with the people of the house and get something to put on," he said turning away when she had finished. "You are disgraceful as you are, child!"

And in truth, now that her excitement was over, Isola did feel rather extraordinary in her dishevelled, half-dressed state before Gilbert Holmes and the strange doctor. Blushing with as much pain as embarrassment, she left the room hastily, while her husband was thanking Gilbert Holmes for what he done in an exasperating manner of personal obligation, as if he had saved a favourite dog, or a costly ring, or any other thing specially his, and of which he was the proprietor. But Gilbert scarcely heard him. He was following Isola with his eyes, and when she shut the door behind her he turned to the window and looked out.

"I must attend to your lady," said the doctor to St. John abruptly.

"I do not think she requires your attentions,"

returned St. John coldly. "She is possessed of immense strength and nerve, and she is not personally hurt. She is not hurt, Holmes, is she?" raising his voice.

"Not that I know of," answered Gilbert, still keeping his face turned towards the window. "She did not get any harm while with me."

"Her coolness is overstrained," said Dr. Brown; "the reaction may be dangerous—far more dangerous than any merely local damage."

"Attend to her by all means if you think it necessary," said St. John a little superciliously. "For my own part, knowing her temperament and constitution as I do, I do not think it is. But I would wish you to be guided by your own advice, not mine."

"I think with you, doctor, that she is overstrained," said Gilbert quickly.

"Which clinches the thing," cried St. John with an air of forced good humour. "Mr. Holmes is a small pope to my wife, Dr. Brown, and his wishes are our laws."

"Then I will see her," said Dr. Brown; and

saying to Marcy with an almost perceptible smile on his face; "Now, my dear young lady, I must leave you to get round of yourself; but I hope that you will not distress your poor papa any longer," and recommending a still more vigorous flicking of cold water into the face of poor limp Rosa, he left the room, desiring to be taken to where the other lady was.

And when he went in he found Isola lying senseless on the floor. The reaction had set in in real earnest, and for a time she was reduced to the level of Rosa Varley.

It was after this that Isola changed so much to her husband. She had never seen his selfishness brought out into such strong relief before; she had never so accurately measured his littleness, so painfully plumbed his shallowness. The contrast between him and Gilbert—"Brother Gilbert"—struck her with perhaps exaggerated force; the one so real and manly, the other such a mere conventionalist—the one divesting himself of every artificial trammel and trapping in the presence of the great realities, the search-

ing tragedies of life—the other always the drawing-room gentleman rather than the man, always bound by social observances, and never able at any time to rise above the slavery of self and forms. That fire seemed to have burnt all the wifely love out of Isola. Henceforth she had only patience and some pity, but no more love nor confidence nor esteem. Her eyes had been couched once and for all of their youthful blindness, and though she would willingly have gone back to the early time of believing darkness, yet it was impossible; she had measured and she had weighed, and belief like love had gone for ever.

St. John felt the change in her heart towards him, but he could not define it. It was not indifference, still less was it temper; she was never irritable, never slighting; she was always cheerful and perhaps more than ever observant of his wishes; but she was no longer loving—it was machine-work, not living action—it was duty not love—death not life. Yes, it was that worst death of all—the death of love. She could never forget that night of the fire when he had shrunk away

into a place of safety, and never moved his hand to help those left behind in danger. A comparative stranger had risked his life to save her and the others—the very groom had done his futile best for her—Mr. Tremouille would have given his life for Marcy—but St. John left all to perish, intent only on saving himself. Was it to be wondered at if she died to him from this hour?

But Marcy always maintained, to his face, that St. John had originally saved them all by giving the first alarm; and Rosa of course echoed. St. John often said bitterly in reply to their caressing acknowledgments, "It is only my wife who sees no good in me. Others can understand me, but I am a sealed book to Isola." To which would reply Marcy soothingly, "No nice person is ever understood at home, St. John; but Rosa and I, we understand you—don't we, Rosa dear? So come to us to be petted and taken care of."

In consequence of which complaints religiously repeated by Rosa at home, Mrs. Joyce took it on herself to rebuke Isola not a little severely for her estrangement from her husband,

and to apprise her, very seriously, that there was no peace for her here, and no hope for her hereafter, unless she would mend her ways and attend more religiously to the obligations of her marriage vows.

Her exhortations did no good; for Isola, who was by no means a saint, was more impressed by their injustice than by their propriety, and so stiffened a little more in her present mould, and felt even less inclined to make things straight by that which alone could pull them out of their present cross-growing form. So Mrs. Joyce did no good to any one; and took home with her a fiery indignation against Isola for her stiff-necked refusal to discuss her household affairs, which considerably disturbed her peace and her digestion.

CHAPTER X.

THE HEIRESS.

By outside appearance most people would have judged Mr. Tremouille to have been a hearty man enough. He was ruddy, portly, active, one of those tall many-fleshed men, given to horse exercise and magisterial duties, who are looked on as human evergreens, and whose death, come when it may, is always regarded as an accident and untimely. But his strength was only in outside looks, and a certain trained muscularity which did very well in its own way, but which broke to pieces so soon as it was tried out of course. And the night of the fire had tried it. He was never the same man again, and never had a

day's health afterwards. Something was always amiss with him—sometimes one thing, sometimes another; till at last he caught a severe cold one raw November day, and on the first of December the kindly owner of the Hall was lying stiff and dead, and Marcy was sobbing on cousin Gilbert's shoulder, an orphan—but an heiress.

For it is of no use to deny it—the bitterness of her orphanage was sweetened by the fact of her heirship; and though she had loved her father as sincerely as she could love anything, yet two thousand a year and absolute liberty while young and beautiful, were pleasant items in the great ledger of her life, and lightened the loss of her best friend not a little. So that even while her tears fell fast and warm, her thoughts glanced towards scenes of future pleasure, and an undertone of joy to come warmed up the cold desolation of the present. But as she sobbed and wept profusely no one wanted other evidence of her sincerity, and no one had the power to read her secret thoughts.

Of course she could not stay where she was if

cousin Gilbert remained, as he was obliged to do, for a time. She would willingly have done so; she would have liked to have been at the Hall alone with Gilbert—the young mistress of whose sorrowful condition every one was thinking tenderly, and to whose will every one was subservient; she would have liked to have given all the orders for the funeral, to have seen the respectful mournfulness of the St. Michael's tradespeople, to have felt herself the centre of the situation and the observed of all observers. But she was wise enough to be able to forego when occasion demanded, and as every one spoke of her leaving as of course—as Mrs. Joyce offered her a home at the Vicarage, and Isola said she must come to the Hermitage, and Gilbert told her decidedly she must choose between the two, else he must take lodgings in the village—she yielded with the passive grace of one too much afflicted to care what became of her in any way, retaining only enough energy to say, "I will go to Isola's," when Gilbert asked her, "Where will you go, my poor child? You must go to one or other of these houses."

"Isola is nicer than Mrs. Joyce," then added Marcy; "and St. John is nicer than Mr. Joyce, and will be kinder to me. Mr. Joyce neglects every one for Bessie as he calls her; and now that poor papa is not here to take my part I should not like to be slighted."

"I don't think Joyce would slight you," said Gilbert gravely. "He is a good-hearted fellow and would be as kind as a brother to you."

"Oh, cousin Gilbert, you don't know him, and I do!" cried Marcy a little pettishly. "He cares for no one in the world but his wife, and really she and Rosa pet him in such an outrageous way it makes me ill to see them. Why only the last time I dined there he gave Bessie the merry-thought and me only the nasty drumstick—and I hate drumsticks! and if there is not enough of anything for all, if Mrs. Joyce helps she gives it to him, and if he helps he gives it to her. And that is horrible you know! And then they call him Simmy! Fancy living with a man called Simmy! I couldn't, cousin Gilbert, and especially not now!" weeping.

"I do not think your objections are very valid I must say," answered Gilbert with a slight smile. "The Hermitage of course is a richer house, and so far, more what you have been used to; and Mrs. Aylott is a woman of more character than Mrs. Joyce; but the Joyces are your oldest friends. For myself I should say the Vicarage; and if you will be guided by me, Marcy, you will go there rather than to the Hermitage."

"I would do anything in the world to make you pleased with me, cousin Gilbert!" said Marcy with her slight lisp. "*You* know that!" looking into his eyes; "but don't force me to go to the Joyces! I do dislike them so much!"

"Dislike them! why Marcy! I thought that Rosa was your greatest friend!" cried Gilbert.

"She is better than her sister, but 'friend'!" with a slight toss of her head. "I love Isola a thousand times better! just a thousand times! And I think it very unkind of you, cousin Gilbert, to oppose me on such a thing, and just now too when poor papa has gone and I have no one to take my part!"

And saying this she turned away, and bury-
her face in her handkerchief burst afresh into
ing tears; standing with her graceful shoulders
rounded forward and her body bent and curved
and pressed together with sorrow. She had
already found that any reference to her poor
dead father, and her own consequent loneliness
and want of protection, was a kind of magic
shibboleth with Gilbert, and she counted on
this outburst as the final settlement of the
matter.

"Well, don't cry, my dear!" said Gilbert
soothingly. "You must do as you like, of course
—who is there to control you? I only gave
you my opinion; what is there to cry for in
that?"

"But I want you to say that you would rather
I went to Isola's," sobbed Marcy.

"No, I cannot say that, Marcy. I would rather
you went to the Vicarage; a great deal rather—
but you must judge for yourself. I think the
Vicarage is the proper place for you, and so I
said from the first."

"I will go to neither!" pouted Marcy. "I will stay here with you, cousin Gilbert, and then no one can say anything!"

"I am afraid they would say a great deal," said Gilbert gently. "No, that will not do, Marcy. I must be here. There are many things to do which only a man can do—which certainly a young inexperienced girl like you cannot manage: and as I am the only male relation my poor uncle had, I must take all that on myself. No, you must choose between your two friends, and go either to the Vicarage or the Hermitage."

"I won't go to the Vicarage!" said Marcy. "Why should I when I don't like? Other people don't do what they don't like—why should I?"

"Well, then, go to the Hermitage," Gilbert answered gravely.

"And you will come and see me very very often, cousin Gilbert?" She turned round and came up to him. "You must come often, you know!—you will have to tell me what you are doing and how things are going on."

"I will come and see you of course," he

answered still in the same grave tone; "but I am sorry for your decision."

"Oh! it will be so much nicer!" pleaded Marcy.

"Well! you have made it now it seems, and," looking out of the window, "here is their carriage coming up the drive."

"That sweet Isola!" said Marcy.

But Gilbert knew she meant that dear St. John instead.

And yet, believing as he did in woman's love as a thing granted once and for ever, and constitutionally unable to understand pretence, he could not make out why she looked and spoke to him with such seductive sweetness, such caressing warmth, while at the same time playing so dangerous a game with Isola's husband.

"Take care!" he said earnestly. "You are your own mistress now, Marcy—for God's sake take care!"

"Of course I will!" she answered with a coquettish glance; "though I don't know exactly,

cousin Gilbert, what you mean I am to take care of—catching cold or getting into debt?"

"Utterly hopeless!" said Gilbert to himself turning away; "or I am utterly stupid, and fit only for the digger's camp again."

"You dear good cousin Gilbert!" said Marcy creeping up to him; "how kind and thoughtful for me you are!"

And then the entrance of the Aylotts put an end to her perilous play, and reminded her that she was an orphan and in tears.

It was Isola, not St. John, who had originally proposed that Marcy should be invited to the Hermitage, should the dear old man die as the doctor prophesied; and she had made the offer with perhaps as much pride as humanity. She was glad to do even Marcy a service, because she was one of the people to whom to do service is to have delight; but there had been also a certain proud disdain of her husband's undisguised admiration which had mingled itself in with the humanity, and which tinged both tone and feelings when she said one day at breakfast,

"If Mr. Tremouille should die, as Dr. Burt says, you can have Marcy here if you like, St. John."

"I suppose I can, Isola. I suppose I may be so far master of my own house as to invite a guest without my wife's permission," had been his ungracious reply.

Not that he felt ungraciously. That was just the outer crust of temper and conceit—inwardly he had loved her for her words; but as he took care to hide this, and showed only the seamy side of his nature, how could she see what he kept concealed? Yet that she did not understand the difference between what he felt and what he showed, was the thing which St. John resented above all else in Isola. As he often said, feelings were greater than words; and so they might be—but who can read feelings save by words or looks? Now when he made this unpleasant little speech to Isola, how could she judge him otherwise than by his own showing? Had she loved him as in olden time perhaps she might have lived by faith; failing this she walked by sight; and as St. John did not choose

that her sight should show her pleasant things, she accepted its revelations of ugliness and did not go beyond.

And now again there was the old wretched mistake between them. He spoke harshly and unkindly, wanting to bend her into a tender and tearful remonstrance, when he would have kissed her and told her to be a good girl, and not such a silly child as to think he did not love her; but she, not understanding this—perhaps she would not have done it if she had understood it—accepted him according to his own showing, and felt aggrieved at his unkind reception of what she thought should have won his gratitude. So the conversation stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and nothing more was said on either side: and when Mr. Tremouille died it stood between them as a settled thing not needing reconsideration. Thus it happened that while Isola was writing the note which invited Marcy to the Hermitage, St. John came into the room to tell her to do so.

"I am writing now," she answered. "That is your wish, is it not?"

"Undoubtedly," said St. John with a magisterial air. "Did I not come expressly to bid you do so?"

Isola's heart stirred a little rebelliously at her husband's tone, which he meant to annoy her. That she should have written to invite even his favourite Marcy without final leave from him, for all that it had been so arranged, seemed to him an exercise of independent will to be met only by a righteous exercise of snubbing. And as St. John was an adept in the art of righteous snubbing, and could do it both more subtilly and sharply than most men, and as Isola had therefore had unusual opportunities for studying its various phases, she caught the lightest shade of intention, and knew almost too clearly when St. John meant her to understand that she was chastised. It was a miserable circle of wrong altogether, and there did not seem much chance of a clear way out anyhow.

So Marcy came, and "now," thought Isola, "my humiliation is to be complete," and "now," thought Marcy, "I shall be like a little queen, and will cut Isola out."

But both reckoned without due knowledge of the man they had to deal with; for no sooner was Marcy fairly established as his guest for probably the remainder of the winter, than the whole complexion of her relations with St. John was changed, and a hazy indefinable something, as strong as a triple gate of brass, and as impenetrable as an enchanted wood, rose up like a six-foot barrier between them.

It was not that he failed in the utmost scrupulousness of attention; if possible he was even more attentive to her than before; but that the manner of his devotion was changed—a certain formal stiffness taking the place of the old un-Aylott-like familiarity, and a courtly Sir Charles Grandison-like politeness doubling the silly flirtation of former days. For being now without a father's protection, and under the sanctuary of his roof, St. John Aylott, who was an honest gentleman whatever his faults of temper, was only careful that there should be no occasion for talk or danger, and that Marcy should be protected from herself—protected from what

might be made; sometimes she tried to break it down by a sudden assault of familiar caressing; sometimes she would stand before him in the attitude of a penitent child with starry eyes half-full of tears, and pretty pouting lips dewy with remonstrance, asking how she had offended him? now and then she caught his own tone and gave it back in tenfold breadth and tenfold icy coldness: but all would not do. St. John sat with a grave unmoved face and eyes bent coldly down, smiling with that cautious measured smile of his which always seemed to hold the muscles of his mouth in check, and answering in that slow half-pedantic manner which of itself chills all warmth or spontaneity: and even Marcy, hitherto irresistible, was obliged to own herself foiled, and obliged to accept her life for the present as St. John Aylott chose it should be ordered.

The only revenge she could take was to sleep with persevering persistency in the evenings, and to greet cousin Gilbert when he called with a warmth of manner that would have been excessive had he been her brother. These were the

sole weapons of retaliation at hand; but whether St. John felt them wound him or no, she could not by any means discover. She only hoped he did. It was not her fault if they were not sufficiently sharp in the edge or true in the fling.

For the rest things went on in the usual course. The poor old man was incessantly lamented, and Marcy's mourning was wonderfully becoming; affairs were put in order; she was formally installed possessor of the Hall and two thousand a year; and then Gilbert's work was done, and he came to bid the Aylotts and his cousin good-bye. It was a sad farewell; in the dark and drear December when nature had died and the old worn-out year was tottering to its end. There were no flowers, no hum of swarming insects, no pattering feet of shy brown beasts passing from the meadow to the woodland, no song of merry birds breaking from the scented bushes, but all was damp and dark and silent, as in the hour preceding death.

Marcy and Isola were in the drawing-room alone, as he entered—Isola with the baby in her

"Play!" she said with meaning: and then she added, "nonsense!"

And both Isola and Gilbert thought she might be right.

"Shall I go and tell him that cousin Gilbert is here now, and wants to wish him good-bye before he goes?" then asked Marcy of Isola, still in the childlike character she had assumed to-day.

"If you like," said Isola; and the girl conveyed herself out of the room, making a pretty little run to the door, and the daintiest inclination as she opened it—also among her characteristic graces of manner.

"Your boy I see grows," said Gilbert to Isola, when they were alone, leaning almost tenderly over the child.

"Yes, he thrives well as the old nurses say," she answered. "Is he not a darling? is he not a handsome fellow?"

"Yes, so far as I can judge; but I could tell you better about the beauty of a colt than of a baby."

"Oh for shame!" she said, but she smiled for

all her rebuke. She could read Gilbert Holmes if not her husband.

"That does not say I do not care about the one so much as the other," then said Gilbert. "Love does not always include knowledge; besides, it is not a man's function to love young children: his own—but not the nursery world indiscriminately. It is a woman's. Don't you see all the difference?"

"Yes," she answered; "but I don't like to hear you compare a colt with my baby."

"Ah! you are a true woman," he cried pleasantly; "and thank God for it! How does St. John get on with the little fellow now? Has he become more reconciled to him?"

"No," said Isola, playing with the baby's hand.

"I am sorry for that, but patience!—it will come later. And now tell me in a few words—for we shall not be long alone—how has Marcy's visit answered? Has she behaved well?"

"St. John treats her with great formality, and there is no flirting," said Isola straightforwardly.

"I am very glad of it!" was his emphatic answer.

"Shall we never see you here again, Mr. Holmes?" then asked Isola, with her eyes cast down, and her pale cheeks a shade paler.

"Oh yes, I hope so! I do not see anything at present likely to bring me here again, but so long as Marcy remains at the Hall, unmarried, I shall have occasion perhaps to see after her affairs every now and then. Yes, I hope so!" again.

"What are you going to do in London?"

"I am going to be a merchant. I have bought a partnership, and I am going down to Bucklersbury daily to learn all about domestics and striped shirtings. Are you shocked at the idea? as Marcy will be?"

"I? no! why should I be shocked?" cried Isola.

"Because a business like that sounds so terribly prosaic," laughed Gilbert: "domestics and striped shirtings to be the final cause of a man's existence!"

"Better that than all this horrid gambling

called speculating!" said Isola; "and better that than the 'genteel poverty' so many men cling to. At all events domestics and striped shirtings are real, which is something!"

"I might have had a place under Government if I had liked," said Gilbert; "but it was not worth much; and though higher in social standing it was not fit provision for a man. It was a mere pretence, and I preferred the substantiality and independence of a merchant's desk. I have a horror equal to your own of the 'genteel poverty' you spoke of—the Government clerkships, the small benefices, the ill-paid practices, the briefless barristerhoods that qualify men to be gentlemen and not men—that give them social standing but neither political influence nor the power of marriage—as marriage is organized in England now. I do not call that a man's life in any sense; and I for one would rather go back to the digger's camp—I would rather build myself a hut in the backwoods and marry an Indian squaw, or work as a sailor before the mast, than attempt such a miserable falsehood. Work is

real, whatever it may be; but this mere hanging on by the skirts of society, and neither doing the work nor living the life of a man, is a mere sham. Ah! you want a few men in England at this present time!—and a wholesale crusade against the luxury which is enervating the country, and the false appearances which taint its very core!"

"I do not think that anything false would suit you, Mr. Holmes," said Isola with a certain depth in her voice that seemed to weight every word with tenfold force.

"Thank you," he said, in something of the same tone. "That is just what I wish you to think of me. By the by, I shall go to see the Osborns, for the sake of that poor little woman," lightly touching the child's rounded cheek. "Shall I give them any message from you?"

"Only my kindest love, and tell them how the boy is—that he is quite well and such a beauty!"

"To Harvey Wyndham?"

"To Harvey Wyndham?" in a tone of disgust, "nothing!"

"He wrote to me the other day, wanting me

to take some shares in a new venture he has mixed himself up with—a silver smelting mine in France. He told me that St. John had invested largely, and that he anticipated profits at cent. per cent. in a year or two—like the Doña Maria."

"I know nothing of what St. John does," answered Isola mournfully. "I wish he would tell me!—but he is not communicative by nature, and he thinks it part of a husband's province to manage all money matters without even telling his wife what he does. He says we have no business to know anything about money but the best way of spending it: which is such a pity!"

"Yes: but a still greater pity in this instance," said Gilbert, "for harm will come of all this speculating! I feel sure of it—I know it! and then you will have to bear the heaviest end of the burden. But you will let me know if I can be of use to you? That is a promise to last as long as life—is it not? We are brother and sister to the end of time, are we not, Isola?—friends whom nothing can part, and with whom nothing can chill their mutual trust and faith into distrust or fear?"

"Nothing," said Isola solemnly; "and you are my brother—my very brother Gilbert!"

And again they clasped hands upon their words, as men clasping hands upon an oath.

St. John and Marcy now came into the room, and after a few words of commonplace explanation and regret Gilbert rose to go.

"It is hard to part with valued friends," he said as he stood on the hearth-rug, his tall square frame looking more massive than ever to-day, his tawny hair and beard tossed into more than ordinary leonine profusion, his clear mild hazel eyes fuller than ever of strength and penetration, and the contrast between him and St. John's graceful sloping sideways attitude more than usually striking.

"Yes, it is always uncomfortable to break up pleasant relations," said St. John with a certain embarrassment of manner from which he was never free.

He was, as we know, a man who at his frankest always seemed as if there was something he was hiding—something he dared not say nor show.

And now that he had a secret in his life—a real bitter family secret which others knew as well as himself—the concealment and embarrassment of manner natural to him had increased.

Isola rose—the child still in her arms. She was as white as the little one's robe, but she was firm and steady, though she felt that she was parting from her only friend in life.

"Well, it must come! good-bye!" said Gilbert holding out his hand to Marcy.

She put up her face to be kissed.

"Good-bye, dearest cousin Gilbert!" she said beginning to cry.

"Good-bye," said Isola, and again their hands met and clasped in that solemn earnest way of ratification which they both understood.

They looked into each other's faces, and it seemed to each as if a whole volume was written in that look—as if they grew to each other, soul to soul and heart to heart, with a truth and an intensity greater than any words would have given—as if they pledged themselves to mutual help and trust, like the brother and sister they

were. Then they loosed hands, and Gilbert turned away.

With the child held up and pressed to her face, Isola watched him walk across the room followed by her husband. At the door he turned again and threw back another farewell to friend and cousin—but his last glance rested on Iosla, and his last smile was to her.

Marcy wept aloud.

"Good-bye, darling cousin Gilbert," she sobbed.

Isola bowed her head and smiled—a pale fleeting plaintive smile—but she did not speak. Then the door closed, and the heavy steady feet tramped out across the hall, and so away into the garden and the outer world beyond.

Isola went to the window and kissed the baby tenderly. The little fellow was wild with baby glee and kicked and crowed lustily, burying his rosy hands among the golden tangles of her hair and clutching at the violet velvet round her neck. And that was the last picture which Gilbert had of Isola as he looked back finally to the house, when he passed through the gate.

"I must take him to nurse, he is too noisy," said Isola to Marcy; and went a little slowly from the room.

"She has gone to cry," said Marcy to herself, drying her eyes so soon as she was alone. "I am sure that she is in love with him! What a horrid creature! and what a shame too, when I like him so much! If she cries I'll tell St. John of her!"

But Isola came down again almost immediately, and her eyes were not red though her face was still unnaturally pale.

"She is an icicle," thought Marcy; "and I who love cousin Gilbert so and am an heiress, to be cut out by such a statue! It is a horrid shame!" thought Marcy Tremouille, "and I hate her!" smoothing her golden head and saying aloud; "Dear Issy! I am sure you are not well to-day, you are so pale! as white as snow! and my goodness! how cold your hands are! Poor Issy! poor little thing! I am so sorry for you!"

But she would not say why she was sorry when Isola pressed her for an explanation. She

only laughed and shook her head, and said with a very strong lisp; "I don't know why I am sorry Isola, but I am! And I am sorry for poor dear St. John too!"

"But why, Marcy? why has all this compassion for us sprung up so suddenly in you?" returned Isola smiling. "Why are we to be so much pitied to-day?"

"Oh! I don't know, Isola," was her only answer.

"Or, rather, you will not say what you mean—is that it, Marcy?"

"Perhaps you can guess," was Marcy's dry rejoinder. "At all events I am sorry for you, Isola, and for St. John too; and if you don't like it, I cannot help it, but I *am* sorry," obstinately.

"Scissors?" laughed Isola, holding up her two fingers.

"Yes, scissors," answered Marcy; "scissors to the end of the chapter!"

CHAPTER XI.

BURST BUBBLES.

THE winter passed away quietly at Newfield. Marcy remained at the Hermitage; keeping house alone with no one to call and see how lovely she looked in her orphaned solitude, not being a very exhilarating prospect. And as she was one of those people who hybernate in easy chairs before the fire, so long as she had a pleasant room in which to doze away the dull days, and certain favourite delicacies for food, one place was almost as good to her as another. And after all, though she was certainly very dull, Isola and St. John were better than solitude at the Hall, or than Rosa Varley and the turtle-doves at the

Vicarage, as she often said to herself. So she waited at the Hermitage quietly enough, in the mental attitude of a creature coiled up for a spring; and when the time came for the mitigated grief department—the time of green leaves and sunshine—then Marcy would uncoil and the world should see her in all the glory of her spring.

Certainly it was dull at the Hermitage meanwhile. The sudden running into sand of her flirtation with St. John was exasperating. The end of that silly chain had been cut off when she entered the house as an orphan, and search as she might, she had never found the smallest strand on which to fasten fresh links.

"Great stupid thing!" she said to Rosa, "he is as stiff as a poker and as formal as if we were all kings and queens!"

"Perhaps he is afraid of Isola," suggested Rosa timidly.

Marcy did not hear her.

"But it is so ridiculous, Rosa!" she went on to say pouting. "I never saw anything so silly—and such a sudden change! He will never be

alone with me for a moment, and he always calls me Miss Tremouille now, and he used, you know, to call me Marcy! and he is just as formal and silly as he can be. Why what is he afraid of, great conceited thing!"

"Mrs. Aylott," said Rosa in a louder voice.

"Oh, no! not of her; he doesn't care for her," said Marcy with a certain conscious laugh: "and she doesn't care for him either, Rosa, I can tell you."

"Then she ought, and she is a very wicked woman!" said Rosa Varley warmly. "I have no patience with wives who do not love their husbands! What did they marry for if they did not love them?"

"She might when she married, but she does not now, that is all I know," said Marcy. "She likes cousin Gilbert a great deal better than she does St. John Aylott—and I don't wonder at it," sighing.

"Oh, Marcy! a married woman!" exclaimed Rosa. "How terrible! how wicked!"

"But St. John is not very kind to her, that I

must say," said Marcy, a little afraid that she had gone too far. "He speaks to her so coldly, and never tells her anything he is doing or going to do. He never talks to her at all indeed; and fancy, Rosa! all the time that I have been here —four months now—I have never heard him call her once darling, or anything of that kind, and I have never seen him kiss her or put his arm round her waist, or anything!"

"My goodness!" ejaculated Rosa, "that is not like Bessie and Simmy!"

"No," said Marcy drily.

"I sometimes get quite tired of all their pettings and love-makings," continued Rosa a little irritably. "It is all very well, I dare say, but really, Marcy, they do go on in the most ridiculous way sometimes; and though I am very fond of Simmy, very fond indeed, I must say I would rather Bessie and he did not make quite such open love as they do. I do think them silly sometimes—only mind you never say that I said so!"

"Of course not," said Marcy; she repeated every

word of the girl's mild complaint, with additions, to Isola the first time they were alone; "but remember, Rosa," she went on to say, "you are just as silly yourself about Mr. Joyce; and upon my word, I think you were half in love with him at one time—till you fell in love with that horrid Harvey Wyndham."

"Oh, Marcy!" cried Rosa, her face and neck dyed with blushes.

"Well, Rosa, you know you were," repeated Marcy coolly. "It is of no use to deny it; I saw it all; and so did Mr. Wyndham himself."

"Oh, Marcy!" said the poor girl again.

She thought her friend wonderfully unkind to-day; but it was a meek, non-resenting soul at all times, which even unkindness could not rouse to wrath.

And then Marcy, to make up, told all sorts of little gossiping anecdotes about Isola and St. John, and what they said yesterday at dinner, and how they looked to-day at breakfast, and how silly Isola was about that stupid little baby—little fat ugly thing—and how St. John seemed

to hate it, and what a funny thing it was altogether, and Rosa! whose was it really? St. John's own child, said only to be his sister's? or whose? It was such an odd story altogether, and really Isola went on as foolishly about it as if it had been her own, and no wonder St. John was disgusted!

"The fact is, Rosa," said Marcy in conclusion, twining her black locks round her fingers, "I don't like Isola very much. She is very nice and kind and all that, but there is something about her I do not understand, and I never like people that I don't understand. There must be something deceitful and underhand about them I always think!"

Which is about the sum of most persons' thoughts concerning things deeper than themselves.

"I like her for some things," said Rosa a little timidly. She knew to her cost what it was to disagree with Marcy. "She is very kind, but I don't know how it is, I always feel her so much older than she is. I always think of her as about forty—quite an old thing!"

"So do I in a way," said Marcy; "but I don't know why; she is not grave, not nearly so grave as St. John indeed—but then he is such a conceited, stuck-up thing!"

"Why, Marcy! I thought you always liked him so much!" cried Rosa.

"So I did before I stayed here. No! I never liked him very much in reality," said Marcy. "He was something new, and that is always a pleasure in such a dull life as ours; and he is certainly very handsome and very gentlemanlike, but I never really cared for him. I like cousin Gilbert worlds better."

"Perhaps it is as well for Mrs. Aylott that you do," said Rosa innocently.

"Oh, she wouldn't mind! such a cold thing as she is!" said Marcy tossing her head. "Indeed it would serve her right if St. John did really fall in love with me; he did at first, just a little, Rosa," with a look of shy confidence.

"Yes, I know," said Rosa. "I used to think he was very much in love with you, Marcy."

"So did I, Rosa! And so he was until I came

here, and then he changed all at once like this, and I am sure I don't know why."

"How funny of him!" said Rosa.

But the funniest thing of all was that neither of these young ladies applied to Marcy the rule of reprobation laid down against Isola, or seemed to think that the flirtation of a married man came at all into the same category as that of a married woman. And not even Rosa—by no means a bad girl though a silly one—appeared to think there was any evil in estranging the affections of a husband so long as things did not go too far, and appearances and broad moralities were kept up.

And then the luncheon-bell rang, and they both went downstairs, and Marcy met Isola and St. John with perfect grace and cordiality; though to do Rosa justice, being less artful and more conscientious, she felt like a traitress and looked like one. When she went home and told her sister and Mr. Joyce all that Marcy had told her—also with her own additions—Mrs. Joyce got quite excited over Isola's depravity and evil

conduct generally; delivering with more than usual emphasis portions of her favourite thesis on the unhappiness of married life as caused solely by the wife.

"If Mrs. Aylott was a good young woman she would be happy," she said by way of finale. "If she loved her husband as she ought, she could do with him what she liked. It is because she will not go the proper way to work that she gets so often snubbed—and quite right too! Men don't like those great independent creatures who speak their minds and will have their own way. A woman's only power is by influence—indirect, unseen, influence—and by conformity with her husband's will."

"Ah, Bessie! every one is not like you!" said Mr. Joyce fondling her. "There is only one Bessie in the world, and I have her!"

"And I am sure there is only one Simmy!" returned Mrs. Joyce, her weak blue eyes overflowing with tenderness and love.

And then they expatiated in their usual way, sitting on the sofa, talking love in baby lan-

guage, and demonstrating their affection so undisguisedly, that Rosa left the room choking with jealous tears, thinking how pleasant it would be if Harvey Wyndham loved her like that, and what an unhappy girl she was—six-and-twenty and unmarried, and likely to be six-and-thirty and unmarried still, according to present out-looks! She would not have felt it so much had not her sister been so almost insolently happy in her marriage; but no one likes to sit shivering in the sight of warmth and home, disregarded and shut out.

Poor Rosa Varley! There are many Rosas in our country places with hearts brimfull of love and kindness, wanting only the occasion to overflow — the potentialities of faithful wives and tender mothers withering away within the dry husk of loneliness—virgins, not quite of the sun, but rather of the dead cold moon, serving in no temple and dedicated to no shrine, but just withering and wasting as the years roll on, and tell the more loudly as they pass, "The earth has no store of golden grain nor purple grapes for you, poor portionless outcasts of love!"

Poor Rosas! their fate is a sad one—among the saddest of all! And it cannot be said that it is a stately martyrdom, helping on the world's progress by private pains—which might be something in the way of recompense could it but be made clear; for rather is it a martyrdom that keeps back the world's progress, inasmuch as it is a violation of natural law, and the confessed inability of man to render nature and society harmonious.

Very different to what used to be in times not so far back, when the post-bag was merely a leathern envelope for the 'Times' and the 'Saturday,' letters were now many and frequent to St. John. Scarcely a day passed whereon he did not receive several, all of an official and business-looking kind, with many printed reports and circulars among them. A good many came from Harvey Wyndham; and Isola knew his by sight. It was Marcy who told her that those square brick-dust-coloured envelopes were his, else she would not have known; for St. John told her nothing—nothing of the purport of this vo-

luminous correspondence of his, and nothing of his doings either with Harvey Wyndham or with any other.

Sometimes it was easy to see that the letters gave him pain, sometimes simple anxiety; once or twice he became ungovernably angry as he read, and struck his fist on the table muttering to himself, while his eyes had in them a fierce and angry glare which frightened Marcy, though too familiar now to Isola to startle her. And always after such outbreaks there were more printed papers and more letters—Harvey's in especial frequent, and for the most part seeming to cause more annoyance than the rest. Once or twice St. John had gone up to London to settle still more accurately the pattern of the flag under which he was sailing headlong to destruction—going always with the design of making a grand *coup*, as he had learnt to call his money operations, and always letting more and more golden sand dribble through the pierced sieve of Harvey Wyndham's holding.

Extreme in all things, he was now as feverish

in making haste to be a millionaire as he had formerly been apathetic in his indifference to anything beyond what he possessed. For all his cold exterior and guarded manner he had but little self-command when once fairly tried; and he was being tried now. Ever since Richard Norton's terrible disclosures the strain upon him had been very great; and between his two desires—the one to obtain a dazzling fortune that might obliterate the blot on his family name, the other to forget his anguish in a restless excitement—prudence, judgment, moderation, self-control, were all swept to the winds, and his life was now nothing but a burning and unquenched fever.

But things did not go well with him in his new character of city speculator. The Doña Maria had dropped her mask at last, and had been obliged to own herself a sucked orange skin, good for nothing but the remembrance of former juices. She had given rich store of golden fruit while her vitality had lasted, and the original cultivators had had an abundant harvest, but for the later comers the exhausted yield had been a

mere name, no more; and St. John Aylott, for one, had lost his thousands as neatly as if he had dropped them one by one into the sea. The Doña Maria very wisely refused to fight a losing battle, so quietly wound up her affairs, repurchased all her shares for the original sum of twenty pounds each; and St. John received his allotted portion with the rest, at about the rate of three shillings in the pound.

This was his first experience in the rapidity with which money in the share market can verify the old German legend, and like Rübezahl's glittering coin of the evening change itself into withered leaves before the morning.

Other losses came: they came fast and hard and heavy; and with every loss the mad gambling spirit woke up to greater activity, and St. John went deeper and deeper into the vortex, always believing that he was going to recoup, as he called it, before many weeks were over, and that his play of double or quits must come right in the end. And when a man has got to this pass, he is simply hopeless and already ruined.

It was a bright spring day—a day that looked full of hope and joy—a day wherein sorrow seemed out of rule, and sin almost impossible—when children lived with the fairies, and their elder sisters dreamed of love, and the aged thought of the long ago, and were glad to have one such glimpse of earth again before called to their last home. The garden was gay with anemones and crocuses and all early flowers; the hedges were green with tender little plumelets of fresh young leaves; the hawthorn twigs were crimson as if with rich red blood beneath the juicy bark; the chestnut-trees were full of the great shining cones in which lay folded the future spreading leafy fans; the white beam-tree buds were like waxen flowers; the flame-coloured pyrus reddened the grey house walls; and the half-opened sprays of wistaria fell like green grapes, palely purpled, among the close-growing ivy; everywhere the birds sang among the trees as they sing only on such days in spring-time; and everywhere the same abounding life and sweetness and delight made the passing moments very

precious, and the future dreams more precious still.

Isola was sitting on the lawn—Marcy beside her thrown back in her favourite attitude caressing her parrot as usual; the child was playing on a large tiger-skin spread on the short grass at Isola's feet, every now and then lifting himself up on one hand and holding up a flower or a toy with the other. It was a pretty picture and well enframed. The sunlight fell on the young wife's golden hair tied round with a violet velvet band; it fell on the boy's bright rosy face and danced in his wide blue eyes, bringing out the downy softness of the young cheeks, and the brilliant colours of the flowers, and the violet tones of Isola's clinging dress, and the grey shadows in the folds of the child's white frock, and the lustrous colour of the little blue shoes and the blue bows and broad blue sash upon the embroidery, till every hue and tint had a value far beyond its own. It fell too on Marcy in her sables; but over the black gown was thrown a large ermine cape, and the brilliant green of the lory with the

purple throat and paler breast set against her raven hair and flushed damask face, was in itself a chord of colour.

They were sitting there, not speaking, though the child's clear voice every now and then broke out like a bird's song, when St. John came out upon the lawn, standing at a little distance from them and looking at them long and earnestly. They did not see him, for he had come round on the turf and they had not heard him.

"Would you like St. John to buy this place, Isola?" asked Marcy suddenly.

"Yes," she answered. "I have grown very fond of it. It is so lovely! I think I should be perfectly happy here till Reginald grew up, and then I should miss him and be lonely."

"What! you like this stupid Newfield better than London?" Marcy cried.

"Yes, very much better. I do not think any comparison is to be made between London and the country," smiling.

"My goodness!" ejaculated Marcy pityingly, and shrugging her shoulders.

These words, accidentally overheard, seemed to nerve St. John into something hitherto shrunk from. He was deathly pale as he came forward, with his head a little turned sideways, and his long thin hands playing restlessly with his watch-chain. But he looked resolute if troubled, like a man who knows the worst and who has therefore nothing more to fear—who has only to bear.

"Send that child away," he said peremptorily as he came to them.

Time had not made him more tolerant of his nephew, nor more generous toward Isola's affection for him; on the contrary; with an accumulative nature like his things grew and deepened in their power of annoyance—not being of those with whom habit makes tracks for the smoother running of disagreeables.

Poor Isola was sorry for the order. "Nurse" was at dinner; the sweet air was like life to the little fellow; and he was quite good and not exacting. He wanted nothing but a pleasant smile and baby word every now and then, when

he held up a flower or a toy and babbled over it—asking the great life which he could not understand to babble with him. She hesitated an instant. Not self-willed rebelliousness, as St. John would have said, but a feeling of justice to the little one made her pause before she obeyed. And then she remembered what Gilbert had once said to her. "You must not be disappointed if your husband never likes his nephew while he is a young child and never willingly sees him. Some men are not paternal by nature, and St. John is one of them."

And remembering this, and feeling that it would be unwise to provoke him, and that the child had better lose an hour of sunlight and fresh air than gain even still greater ill-will from his uncle, she gathered him up with all his toys, and carried him away. It was a very small and unimportant event, but our daily lives are made up of such. We do not live in cataclysms, and the disturbance of minor conflicting duties is sometimes quite as painful, and more perplexing than the larger trials. The difficulty of choice

between conflicting duties had been Isola's cross of late, and apparently she had not yet laid it down.

As she was going St. John, annoyed that she had not summoned a servant, said to her authoritatively; "Come back again immediately, Isola, I wish to speak to you."

Something in his voice, beside its angry authority, made Isola turn quickly to look into his face; but she saw only, what she already knew so well, the lips closed and the eyes cast down, and the shy manner of the half-averted head, as if unwilling to have it seen where he could be hit.

She took the child away and came back at once; but even that small delay had vexed him, and his face was darker when she reappeared. He made room for her on the garden seat, and she sat down beside him—Marcy on his other side—the warm spring sun shining brightly over all.

"I have rather unpleasant news to-day," he began drily, stroking Marcy's parrot.

"I am sorry for that," said Isola with her flexible voice. "I hope nothing very bad."

"Yes, it is very bad," he answered.

The moisture was on his forehead and through the dark threads of his moustache, and he drew out his handkerchief to wipe it away.

"St. John!" said Isola laying her hand on his arm. Her womanly instinct of sympathy showed her something of the truth.

"Did you speak?" he said coldly.

"I do not like to see you look so!" was her answer. "I am afraid you are troubled about something."

"Disagreeable news is usually rather troublesome," he answered with a cold smile; and Isola, chilled, fell back and took her hand from his arm: while he, knowing what he was suffering, felt hurt and aggrieved that she was not more patient with his waywardness and persistent in offering what he rejected.

"I heard you say just now that you should like to live here," he began, with an unpleasant smile.

"Yes," answered Isola. "I was saying so to Marcy. I have grown very fond of the place and once you used to talk of buying it."

"I wish I had done so now: I would, but I was overpersuaded by that scoundrel, that Norton! He has been at the bottom of it all!" said St. John vehemently.

"At the bottom of what?" asked Isola and Marcy together.

"Of my disagreeable piece of news." He laughed: and it was a laugh which made Isola wish he had wept or stormed instead. "Of my ruin," he then added.

"Ruin!"

Marcy started up and looked at him as if she expected to see him transformed before her eyes, while Isola clasping her hands on his arm said in a low voice fervently, "There is no ruin while there is home and love, St. John!"

"No, not while there is either," he replied unclasping her hands, that he might have the pleasure of being wooed and besought to be comforted by her love. "Had you been my

real wife—my wife in heart as well as by mere name, this blow would have fallen lighter; as it is I am beggared now of everything."

"No! no!" she cried warmly. "You judge me by yourself, dear!"

"There! even at such a moment as this you must dispute with me!" he cried irritably.

"Dear St. John, I will not vex you again, I will say no more," was her answer.

"And now you are sullen," he said still more irritably.

His temper was rising and his self-restraint fast wearing threadbare, and Isola knew the frightful outburst that would come if he could not be diverted.

"Dear St. John!" said Marcy opportunely, speaking very lovingly, "I am so sorry that you are ruined. What can I do to help you? I am sure that poor papa would have helped you if he had been alive! And I know it has not been your fault," she added—and that subtle touch pleased the poor weak soul, greedy of praise and demanding to be considered infallible by all who

said they loved him, more than all the rest. "I know that you must have been ill-treated or deceived or something," she continued. "You are far too good and clever to have ruined yourself. Oh, what can I do!" with a pretty kind of despairing earnestness very effective.

"Nothing, my sweet child," was his answer, made with undisguised tenderness. How different her conduct to Isola's he thought! "Your affectionate sympathy helps me—the first I have had yet," he said, looking into her face as she stood before him, half curved, as was her wont, like a graceful plant gently pressed by a passing wind.

"You can live at the Hall, you know," she went on to say. "I shall be so glad! It will be such a nice thing for me, will it not, St. John dear?" with infantine earnestness, as if she was proposing a really feasible scheme, in which she herself believed.

St. John smiled sadly. "Thank you, from my soul! the offer was like you, Marcy—but it would be impossible to accept it, my dear! It

shows however what a heart you have—that you can feel and pity; which every one cannot," emphatically.

"Oh, I am sure Isola is sorry for you," said Marcy prettily. "Are you not, Isola dear? And then she loves too, so she must be sorry!"

"Perhaps, on that account!" laughed St. John hoarsely. "You will be sorry for me, Isola, will you not? when the pressure comes on you as well?" he said, after a pause, with a mocking laugh.

"Sorry for your misfortunes only because I am a loser also?—have I then shown myself so mercenary?" asked Isola in a tone of reproach.

"You have generally shown yourself selfish, my dear child," her husband answered with what he meant to be a quite philosophical impartiality of judgment.

"Oh! I do not think that Isola is selfish!" pleaded Marcy. "She likes to have her own way, and she does not like to give up to any one, but then no one does who is as clever as she is—but she is not selfish. At least I don't think so! Dear Issy!" affectionately.

"Ah! you do not know her," said St. John with a very lame attempt at jocularity.

"Oh, Marcy! do not try to stand my advocate with St. John!" Isola exclaimed, deeply hurt. "If he likes to think ill of me, he must. There is no good in any outside stranger trying to make a husband think well of his wife if he does not do so of his own accord."

"I did not mean to vex you," said Marcy quite humbly.

"Vex me! I am not vexed!" said Isola in a tone of annoyance. "You so often say that, Marcy! I do not think I am such a wretched temper as you make me out to be."

"Well! you are cross enough now, dear," said Marcy.

And Isola could not but acknowledge to herself that the girl was right, and that she was cross. Small wonder if she was!

"But why are we all quarrelling like this?" then said Marcy in great penitence; "and when such a dreadful thing has happened too! Don't let us talk of each other—let us talk of St. John, Isola: and what we can do for him."

Isola did not answer. She could not discuss her husband's affairs with Marcy Tremouille.

"Do you not love me enough to talk of my future, Isola?" then asked St. John with more pain than temper, "or are you so entirely indifferent to me that you do not care what becomes of me?"

"I would talk for ever if it would do you any good," said Isola with embarrassment. She felt it hard to be dragooned into the manifestation of tenderness!

"Good! I do not want you to do me good—to give me money or to work for my support!" was his impatient reply. "But is your sympathy of no value? When a husband is in trouble do you not think he looks for his wife's sympathy almost as a right?"

"You know I sympathize with you, St. John!" she answered earnestly. "Surely! surely! you do not want to be convinced of that!"

"But say so then!" cried Marcy impatiently. "Goodness! what is the use of sympathizing and all that, if you do not say so! I am sure if I was

poor darling St. John's wife—I don't know what I wouldn't do!"

"Well, I hope there is one thing you would not do—share the cold and stony heart my wife has shown me at this moment!" said St. John. "If it had been a mere stranger's trouble, I think I should have expressed myself with more warmth and more heart, than she has shown to me!"

"Be more affectionate, Issy!" said Marcy in a loud whisper, giving her a little tap on the shoulder.

And Isola felt that if she had been a woman given to outbursts of temper, she would assuredly have broken out now. She had never felt so humiliated, or so embarrassed. As she did not know what to say, she took refuge in silence again, and said nothing. But it was the same to St. John whether she spoke or kept silence. Either seemed equally unwifely—equally cold and short of what he wanted—he who loved her so devotedly, and whose worst offence against her never included the loss of love! Poor fellow! he committed the terrible mistake of thinking

that love all-sufficient in itself, and not needing to be companioned with pleasant temper or kindly dealing. He loved her; in his worst moments he had still ever loved her; and he could not understand why this should not be enough for both her happiness and her contentment in return. He could not understand how he had killed her love inch by inch, fibre by fibre, till now, though his heart broke for the want, it would never live again for him.

She could suffer for and with him bravely and cheerfully; she would work for him, be affectionate in form, thoughtful for his pleasures, careful of his needs—but she could not love him. She would pass to her world as a model wife—but this was not love. It was simply the graceful dress of a sweet temper, and the expression of a dutiful nature. But it was not love.

And later in the day, when they were alone and St. John broke down in all pride and manliness—when he realized, at least in imagination, the terrible fact of ruin, and she comforted him as she alone could—even then, when her eyes

were wet with tears, and her lips warm with kisses—when his head was on her bosom, and her hands were through his hair, and her rich voice was speaking words of hope and comfort and cheerful courage—even then her soul recognized the sad reality, "This is pity, not love."

Pity, however, given in such generous measure and with such unstinted warmth that St. John accepted it for the richer gift, and so was happier to-day even in his ruin than he had been in his prosperity.

"I would have given all that I have lost for such a day as this!" he said to her with passionate tears. "All, and more than all, to have you as my own Isola again—my own, as you used to be!"

But when he left her Isola sat with her face buried in her hands; one pitiful, prayerful moan possessing her, "Oh, that I could love him again!—that I could love him again!"

END OF VOL. II.

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